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Housekeeping Mage from Another World

Making Your Adventures Feel Like Home!

BY **You FUGURUMA**

ILLUST. **NAMA**





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Part 1: Blending Hearts

Chapter 1: The Woman from the Heavens

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The low clouds were gloomy and oppressive. Snow continued to fall like balls of cotton, piling as high as ten centimeters outside of the barrier stakes. The snow that did not melt upon meeting the air-conditioning magic slowly melted inside its confines instead.

“Horrible weather,” Alec muttered. “It would be one thing if it was just us, but it’ll be rough on Annelie and her aides.”

He had woken up and gotten dressed, and was now thinking about the day ahead. Rurii, who had just had a drink of magical water to start its own day, wobbled by his feet.

“Seems like it...” said Shiori, who paused her breakfast preparations to look up at the sky.

It was just like this back when I first arrived in this world, she thought.

Shiori had been swallowed by a space-time anomaly on her way back from work, and was ripped from her home of Japan and thrown into another world. It had been winter back then, just as it was now. Shiori had studied like a maniac, desperate to get accustomed to the country and world she now found herself in, and she remembered watching the snow falling outside her window. The scenery, entirely covered in white, left her feeling as if she had been abandoned. In an attempt to somehow bury her loneliness, Shiori had poured herself into learning the local language. Those memories were still fresh—after all, she had arrived in this world only four years ago.

When she’d landed in Storydia, Shiori carried with her not a single object of value outside of the clothes she wore. Her family and friends, the status and wealth she had accumulated—she had lost everything from her past life, down to even proof of the memories she had of that existence. Not a single thread remained to link her to her former home. All she had was the knowledge and experience she’d accumulated back home, but that was of no use to her in a world where she did not know how to communicate.

Shiori was not like the main character in a grand adventure. She did not have some grand duty to accomplish, nor had she been granted amazing powers—she was an ordinary woman hurled, as if by

accident, into another world. She was merely who she was—Shiori Izumi.

With not a coin to her name, Shiori fell under the care of Zack Ciel, who gave her food and a place to stay until she was capable of doing odd jobs around the Guild to make money. This was why she devoted herself to learning everything she felt was important—the language, the culture, and the history of Storydia. Each day was a struggle to grasp and understand all of these things, and it wore Shiori down, both physically and mentally.

In time, Shiori's hard work paid off and she was able to live independently, but she was still, at least in terms of appearances, a foreigner from the East and uncommon to the people of Storydia. Few wanted to hire her for work. Unable to find an ordinary job, Shiori had no choice but to turn to adventuring—a comparatively dangerous profession.

By utilizing her limited magical powers to create innovative solutions to chores and housework, Shiori was able to earn a living by taking care of her fellow adventurers' food, cleaning, and camping needs. Over time, the people of the city became used to her, and Shiori felt as if she had found a place somewhat like home—yet even this small glimmer of hope was ripped from her grasp by the incident that occurred soon afterwards.

Shiori was initially glad to have been invited to join a party of adventurers. They were nice to her even though she was a foreigner, and they all seemed like good people. She trusted them. But as they spent more time together, her companions took advantage of the fact that she had no one else, and over the coming months, Shiori's small savings were slowly taken from her. But it wasn't just money that was taken, it was the place she thought of as home—it was her apartment, it was the clothes that symbolized her last link to Japan, and it was her self-respect. In the end, she was abandoned and left to die in the depths of a labyrinth—a means of silencing her.

Having been betrayed so horribly by her own companions, Shiori closed her heart to those around her. She was terrified of building and maintaining close relationships—perennially worried that she might once again be betrayed. Though Zack and her friends worried for her, Shiori did not want to cause them any further trouble, and so refused to rely on them.

It was horribly lonesome. Shiori had no way to comfort the anxiety in her own heart, and the need to put on a show of strength at all times made her feel as if she could not connect with others. She was tormented by homesickness and fear of the future, and she could feel herself being eaten away by her own seemingly endless loneliness. She could not lean on anyone, and could not bring herself to show

weakness, but in the silence of her heart, she wept. She cursed herself for knowing that it would be easier for her heart to simply shatter, but she lacked the conviction to let it happen.

But then...

Shiori looked up at Alec, standing beside her. The eyes under that chestnut-brown hair—the dark magenta of a clear spring night—looked into her own. Alec Dia. The man who was her partner, and her lover.

The two had met, worked, and talked together numerous times, and as they got to know each other more deeply, Shiori had felt drawn to Alec. He had taken her frozen, stubborn heart and given it a chance to melt, and she had fallen in love with him. It was like magic—the realization that the homesickness and the solitude that had settled in her heart were fading.

It had been less than six months since the two had first met, but even now Shiori felt that she was ready to give her all to this man who stayed by her side. Alec, too, had felt the same, and their relationship had thus bloomed to this point.

Alec looked up at the sky of falling snow and let out another sigh.

“Certainly doesn’t look like the snow is going to clear up anytime soon,” he said. “We should confer with Annelie about what to do.”

“Yes, good idea.”

Annelie Lovner was an artist and the margravine of the Lovner family—a distinguished and well-known artistic family that had been around since the founding of Storydia Kingdom.

Annelie had requested adventurer support and guides for a journey to Silveria Tower, saying that she wanted to use the scenic winter view from its roof as a motif for a new series of paintings. However, the margravine had one more objective, and it was perhaps the *true* reason for her journey—a Lovner family ritual.

Annelie had brought two aides with her on the journey, one of whom was Dennis Fryden. He was her secretary, and also the man she was in love with. Dennis, too, had feelings for his margravine that went well beyond their lord-and-servant relationship. However, his mother was no longer a noble, having given up her title to marry a man of Imperial blood. So though Dennis had Lovner blood running through his veins, he was a commoner, and the descendant of an Imperial. It was for this reason that many frowned upon Annelie making him such a close aide—and also the reason that Dennis, aware of his position, could not bring himself to tell Annelie his true feelings.

But this was not the only burden that weighed heavily on Dennis’s shoulders. He was also prejudiced against immigrants and adventurers, a discriminatory nature that emerged from a life-changing incident—that of the circumstances of his father’s death, a

man who had been an adventurer himself.

Annelie had gathered up her courage and decided to visit Silveria Tower—where she and Dennis could confront their feelings for each other, and the scars that he carried. This was at the heart of the Lovner family ritual—it was for the lord of the family to share their heart with the person they wanted to spend their life with, and for the two of them to agree to overcome whatever hindrances faced them, together. The ritual was a chance for the lord to make clear their feelings and their commitment.

Annelie and Dennis had talked for a long time, but in the end they had overcome the trial—their hearts were finally free to intertwine.

“It doesn’t look like it’s going to be an easy walk in this weather...” muttered Annelie, looking out from the cover of her tent so as not to get wet.

“We’re well ahead of schedule, so there’s no need for us to insist on leaving today.”

Dennis peered over her shoulder and up at the sky as he spoke—he was her secretary, her aide, and as of yesterday, her lover. He could tell that visibility was going to be bad, making it hard for the inexperienced to walk easily.

“What would you like to do?” asked Alec. “We can stay here one more night, or we can make the trek back to the observation deck.”

The three nobles—Annelie, Dennis, and Walt—talked among themselves for a few moments, and then Annelie spoke for them.

“Hm... Well, I *would* like to take another look through the tower, so perhaps I can make a decision once we reach the bottom.”

In any case, the party was not lacking in rations, so staying another evening was not an issue.

The party had a breakfast of onion soup and, upon Walt’s request, sausage bread skewers. With that done, they got to work taking down their campsite and readying their knapsacks—Shiori carefully put the horned hare meat in a storage bag for later use. Finally, they got ready to leave, and made sure there were no issues with their weapons, armor, and equipment.

“And then there are the Imperials, from yesterday...” muttered Alec.

“Are they still here?” asked Annelie.

“For better or for worse, they’ve been on the third floor ever since we last saw them.”

While working through the floors of the tower towards the roof, Annelie’s party had encountered a trio of Imperial adventurers. They had shoddy equipment, meager supplies, and had already run out of food by the time they arrived at the tower. The trio hadn’t even attempted to negotiate—they had planned to steal the party’s food by

force. In the end, however, they had been overwhelmed by Alec alone, and after receiving a few rations (a generosity on Annelie's part) they had retreated to the third floor. They hadn't moved since. Shiori had kept a watch over them with her search magic, but they had made no attempt to move anywhere else. Perhaps it was simply that they no longer could.

Shiori remembered the look of the swordsman—haggard, on the verge of collapse, and on his hands and knees begging for any rations they could spare.

"Shall we see how they're faring?" she asked. "If they can still walk we could take them with us, and if they can't..."

Her words trailed off. She felt something uncomfortable welling up from the pit of her heart, and put a hand to her chest without realizing it.

"If she can't move, we leave her. We leave her in the labyrinth when she's completely exhausted."

Shiori's legs began to shake at the memory of the cold floor of the labyrinth, and the darkness into which light no longer reached. She remembered her thoughts as her consciousness had faded—how she had worked so hard, tooth and nail, only for her final moments to be spent in a place so lonely.

And then she felt Alec's hand on her shoulder. The kind looks on the faces of her companions. Rurii the slime, rubbing against her leg. They all cared and worried for her. She took a few deep breaths, and smiled.

"I'm okay..." she whispered.

Alec's eyebrows drooped—he wasn't so sure.

"I'm okay," she repeated. "After all, I have you."

She knew she'd be fine with Alec at her side. She also had Rurii, Clemens, and Nadia. Thoughtful, caring companions—with them, she knew she would be okay. Alec looked down at her for a time, then let out a breath and nodded.

"If we have to leave them, then we leave them with some food," said Annelie. "We'll report them to the knights upon our return."

The knights could take care of the rest. The most likely result was that they'd end up behind bars in a medical facility somewhere. They had threatened Shiori's party with harm, and they were also guilty of raiding the observation deck along the forest paths. The mage in charge of the trio was certain to be charged and punished—the fate of his two assistants, who had done little more than follow his orders, was less clear.

"Well then, let's get to it."

At Alec's order, the party fell into its usual formation and descended the stairs back into the tower. Nothing much had changed

since the previous day, and so they made their way down, getting rid of stray magical beasts along the way.

Of the materials they gathered from slain beasts, Annelie decided to take as reference that which was of most interest to her. She put it all very carefully into storage bags, but Dennis vehemently refused anything that was too disgusting—he claimed it too difficult to store back at the manor. In these cases, the pouting Annelie made do with sketches.

“But I so very much wanted the is groda’s poison sacs...” she muttered. “Something so grotesque is ordinarily so hard to get a hold of...”

“Where in the world would we put them?” cried an exasperated Dennis.

“We’d borrow the kitchen cold storage. It is raw material, after all.”

“Enough jokes. If you want to store something like *that* you’ll buy a separate cold storage!”

Annelie and Dennis had decided to drop the lord-and-servant etiquette before returning to the manor, and their bickering sounded so unlike the lovers they were that the whole party burst into laughter. In this way, the party chatted casually as they ventured forth until they reached the spiral staircase leading to the third floor.

“Oh...” said Shiori, sensing a wavering magic in the air, followed by the sound of impact. “Magic...”

“Someone cast something,” said Alec.

The Imperial trio were on the move. They’d used magic—perhaps a fight had started.

“But you’d ordinarily expect to sense magical beasts too, no?”

Nadia raised a good point. The third floor was equipped with especially powerful barrier stakes, and there were no signs of monsters on the floor. No signs of people outside of the three Imperials either. Tension and worry ran through the party.

“What is it?” asked Annelie. “Is something happening?”

“We don’t know,” said Alec quickly. “But it doesn’t seem like a fight.”

Voices arguing floated through the air. Then another shock ran through the tower. It was coming from the main corridor.

“I’m going to check it out,” said Alec. “Everyone stay here.”

As soon as he finished speaking, a heavy shock shook the tower. There was a man’s cry and a woman’s shriek, followed by the sound of rampant, rushing water. Alec thought it smelled stale, then noticed it was quickly flooding the corridor.

“What the—?!”

Shiori screamed as water flooded towards them. She instinctively

used her earth magic to create a stone barrier from the floor, while Nadia tried freezing the incoming water with ice magic.

“Up the stairs! Now!” shouted Alec.

Alec and Clemens pushed the nobles, who were frozen in shock, up the staircase. But there was more water than any of them had thought, and it broke through Shiori’s barrier with ease.

Shouts and screams rang through the air. Shiori knew she would be pulled into the water. But at that very moment, she felt Alec’s strong grip on her—and then her vision turned blue.

The world wavered unsteadily before Shiori’s eyes. She couldn’t tell up from down in this world of pure blue. She let herself drift into a strange daze, like floating in a bed of water, and for a moment she fell into unconsciousness.

“—ori! Shiori! Shiori!”

Shiori awoke to the sensation of being shaken inside of a strong grasp. She slowly opened her eyes, and the worried looks of her companions filled her vision. She felt Alec’s arms around her, and saw his expression soften with relief. Drops of water fell from his hair onto her cheek, and the cold brought her back to reality with a start. She was freezing. Her drenched clothes were quickly sapping her of her strength.

She had been defenseless in the moment. She should have been washed away in the water flooding the corridor. But...

“Rurii saved us. It wrapped us in its body and carried us.”

“Rurii did that?!” Shiori thought of it reaching out, wrapping them up, and carrying them upstairs. “Thank you, Rurii. That couldn’t have been easy.”

And she could tell that it hadn’t been—the slime was stretched across the floor like a puddle. At Shiori’s thanks, the slime shook a feeler as if to say, “*Don’t worry about it.*” All the same, it was clearly exhausted—and remained lazily pooled across the floor.

“Is anyone hurt?” asked Alec.

“We’re fine,” said Annelie. “Thanks to you and Clemens pushing us up the stairs, we...ah, ah—”

Annelie sneezed before she could finish her sentence. Dennis and Walt, by her sides, were also shivering. Though they’d escaped being washed away, they hadn’t escaped being drenched by the water as it had splashed against the walls and staircase.

“Let’s get your bodies warmed ASAP,” said Alec. “We can’t have you getting any colder than you already are.”

“I’ll ready a bath right away!” said Shiori.

Shiori and Alec ran into a small room nearby and put her earth magic to use. She quickly turned the stone floor into a bathtub, then

created a wall in the middle of it. Once she'd used a flush of hot water to disinfect it, she filled it with warm water. As she did all of this, Alec and Clemens went about setting up barrier stakes. When they were done, Shiori filled the space with air-conditioning magic.

Shiori had been drenched in the water that had flooded the third floor, but fortunately the contents of her knapsack were dry. She took out the bathing items and passed them around.

"Please leave your wet clothes out," she directed. "I will wash them immediately."

The water they'd been hit with was stale and unclean, so she wanted to get her laundry magic going as soon as possible—she didn't like the smell coming from everyone's clothing. At the very least, she wanted to wash and dry everyone's coats while they were in the bath. But while she was ushering everyone in, Annelie took her by the arm.

"Shiori, you and Nadia should take your baths too. I don't like the idea of you getting any colder than you already are. The laundry can wait."

"Oh...but..." said Shiori, hesitating.

"We're going to be in a lot of trouble if you adventurers come down ill," said Dennis, adding his opinion. "Who's going to escort us back to town then? Please—Annelie is right."

"I agree with Dennis on this one," said Alec. "Take your bath now, and Clemens and I will take ours afterwards."

Shiori still felt hesitant. In truth, the laundry had been something of an excuse for her—she didn't want Annelie seeing her scars. But her body was getting chills, even here in a room filled with her air-conditioning magic. If she didn't warm herself soon, her body would suffer for it. She also realized that the longer she took making up her mind, the longer Alec and Clemens would be kept waiting in their own drenched equipment.

"Okay," she nodded.

Annelie let out a sigh of relief—she'd asked Shiori knowing that the mage was sensitive about her scars. She was trying to be considerate of Shiori.

"Please go right ahead," said Shiori, "I'll quickly dry Alec's and Clemens's clothes before I join you."

"Got it."

Shiori watched as Annelie and Nadia began getting ready for their baths, then quickly went about drying Alec's and Clemens's clothes—she was worried that waiting too long in the cold would be bad for them. The two men had indeed been freezing—their hardened expressions softened with relief at the moment she cast warm air in their direction.

"Thank you," said Alec. "We'll start a basic campfire to keep

ourselves warm, so go take your bath.”

“Okay.”

Shiori walked quickly to the bath while Alec fished through his knapsack for a fuel cube. After a moment of doubt, she quickly took off her wet clothes and joined the other two women in the bath. The warmth began to soak into her fingers and toes, which had been the coldest.

Shiori peeked through the steam and glanced at Annelie. The margravine’s face was reddened from the warmth of the bath, but otherwise her expression was the same as always—Shiori was glad the sight of her body hadn’t made the margravine uncomfortable. Perhaps it was thanks to the steam, which obscured visibility.

Nadia’s eyebrows drooped slightly as she smiled, and Shiori gave her a gentle smile in return. The women soaked silently in the bath—the only sound in the room was that of splashing water. When their bodies were finally warm, Annelie spoke.

“I’m truly grateful you’re here with us, Shiori,” she said. “Without you, we may all very well have frozen to death.”

“Think nothing of it.”

Shiori was still embarrassed by direct compliments. But at the same time, she too was glad she’d put time into developing housekeeping magic. It was more than simply the craft of making a pleasant campsite—it was just as useful in emergency scenarios like this one.

While on expeditions, adventurers had no idea what misfortunes might befall them or slow their progress. She’d heard many horror stories. There had been an archer whose knapsack had been ripped open in a battle in the snow, and who’d had no choice but to try eating their own frozen rations—which eventually killed them when their stomach couldn’t process the food. Then there had been a swordsman who’d forgotten his mending kit, then met a monster whose horn snagged his frayed armor, knocking him off-balance and resulting in his death. There had also been a party that found themselves assaulted by unexpected heavy rain and fierce winds—they took shelter in a cave, but lost half their members to exhaustion and cold when they couldn’t warm their bodies, even though it was summer.

The truth of the matter was that even experienced adventurers could end up dead for the most trivial of reasons. And while Shiori’s skills were subtle and in some ways unremarkable, she knew they had their uses in life-and-death situations like this one. She knew that all her hard work had not been in vain.

Once they were sufficiently warm, the women got out of the bath, quickly dried themselves down, and changed into their spare clothes.

Then they ushered Alec and Clemens into the bath. Shiori dried everyone's hair, then set about doing the laundry while Nadia and Rurii kept watch. Shiori was glad that adventuring equipment was so durable—all it needed was a good wash with water. She handled the coats with a gentler touch, but the other clothing she washed as she always did. Finally, she dried it all with warm air currents to finally rid them of the stench of dirty water.

Once everyone was warm and in clean clothes again, a calm settled over the party. Even Rurii had returned to its usual smooth dumpling shape.

"That trio really outdid themselves this time," said Clemens with a frustrated sigh, cleaning out a pouch that had gotten water in it.

"You think they broke the door into the room we couldn't open yesterday?"

"Yep."

There was only one reason that much water could have flooded the third floor of the tower—it was the one room among the four on that particular floor that they'd left untouched. They'd seen the water leaking from behind its doors, and knew from the state of it that the water behind it reached at least one meter in depth. Given that all four of the rooms were the same size, there was no doubt that a lot of water had built up.

But even without having been inside themselves, they'd seen enough to have an idea of what was going on. They'd also seen enough to know better than to force the doors open in the first place. Not that it had mattered in the end—the Imperial trio had gone and forced it open with magic all the same.

But were the trio okay? Those screams they'd heard were anything but ordinary.

"Well, how would you like to proceed?" asked Alec. "Shall we make an opening from up here and head directly outside? Or shall we err on the side of caution and spend another night here to rest?"

Though they had emerged from the flooding unharmed, the situation had exhausted everyone—it was perhaps in the party's best interests to spend a night to rest and recover, especially given that they still had a surplus of rations.

"Yes..." said Annelie, thinking. "Let's wrap things up here for today. To be completely honest, I *am* rather tired."

The usual liveliness of the margravine's voice was strained, and the fatigue was there in her features. Until this incident, she had been curiously looking about the rooms with great interest, but now her head remained mostly drooping and tired.

"Feel free to take lunch without us," said Dennis, "but let us take a short nap—I just want Annelie to get some rest." He wrapped a hand

around Annelie's shoulder. "She was already getting hyperactive and then *that* happened. Annelie, you must be exhausted."

In response to her lover's joke, the margravine pouted.

"Getting hyperactive"? I'm not a child, Dennis..."

The little back-and-forth helped relax everyone.

"Okay, everyone take a break," said Alec. "I'm going to investigate the third floor. Clemens, Nadia—you're on guard duty. Shiori, will you join me?"

"Of course."

The party put up a tent with separate rooms for the nobles to rest in. Once they were inside, Shiori took a magical energy recovery potion, and headed downstairs with Alec.

"Annie? What's wrong? Did something happen?"

Annelie was sitting on a warm rug inside of her tent. Dennis put a gentle hand to her shoulder—he could tell that something was bothering her. Alec and the others had thought it was merely exhaustion, but Dennis knew Annelie well enough to recognize that it was something different. Her dulled expressions, her drooping head, her silence—these were not because she was tired. He saw this in Annelie whenever she was worried.

"I saw them," said Annelie, hugging herself tight. "I saw Shiori's scars."

"Scars?"

Ah, he remembered. *She mentioned scars before.*

"Those scars," said Annelie. "They are not simply the scars of one who has been adventuring. The scars on her arms and legs...there's far too many of them..."

"They were like scars from torture," she said, putting her head in her hands. They struck her as the remnants of a horrible incident. Now she understood why Shiori's own companions worried about her to the extent that they did.

"Even me, someone who has been brought up in luxury, can tell that those scars aren't natural. That's why she didn't want me to see them. I just know that something awful happened to her. And yet somehow she can still wear that placid smile..."

Dennis wrapped Annelie in his arms, patting her shoulder to console her.

"I want to draw her," said the margravine, wiping her tears. "I want to draw her courage and her strength. She bears the scars she does and yet still she stands tall—she is beautiful. I don't know if I have the ability to express such beauty, but I must try..."

"I see. Then you must understand her more deeply," said Dennis. Annelie smiled.

“Yes, you’re right. I want to be her friend...that I may get to know more about her.”

She was a mysterious woman—one who was well-educated and highly skilled, but had no way of proving her own past. Shiori Izumi. She was the woman who had given Dennis what he’d needed to face his own past and his father, who had sullied their family name. And perhaps, through coming to know her better, Dennis too would have a chance to make up for the rude and inconsiderate ways that he had treated her. Like Annelie, he was curious about the housekeeping mage, and so...

“I, too, would like to be her friend,” he said with a smile.

2

Having left Clemens and Nadia to look after the nobles, Shiori and Alec looked down the staircase leading to the third floor. The main floor was still submerged in water, though it was not particularly deep. After gazing at it for a time, Shiori got a strange feeling and tilted her head.

“Is the tower tilted?” she asked.

“You’re right,” replied Alec. “It is.”

Though one side of the floor was submerged under the water, the other side was above it. It was deepest at the staircase, and shallow nearer the corridor.

“That would explain why the water rushed in this direction,” said Shiori.

“Yes. I hadn’t noticed it earlier, but it’s quite tilted, isn’t it?”

They walked down the stairs, closer to the surface of the water. Rurii poked it with a feeler.

“Don’t tell me you’re going to drink all of this,” said Alec, jokingly.

Rurii gave Alec a slap on the leg as if to say, “*Don’t be daft!*” Shiori giggled at the comedic duo, then turned back to the water. In order to drain it, she’d have to make a hole somewhere, but before that she cast her search magic to get a better grasp of the third floor. There were no magical beasts. However, she did pick up some magical pulses wrapped in flames. That, and...

“Are they here?” asked Alec.

“Yes. Two of them...”

It was likely that the magical pulses were exactly what Nadia had thought—fire magic stones. At the end of the corridor Shiori felt two other signals—but only two.

“There’s only two...” repeated Shiori.

“So the third...?”

Alec didn't finish his sentence, but if a presence had vanished, it only pointed to one thing.

"What should we do?" asked Alec. "If we drain the water, we may find something waiting for us at the bottom... We don't have to do this."

"No, we should," said Shiori. "I'm worried about the other two."

It was possible that one of the trio was at the bottom of the staircase, in the water. Which one of the trio it was, they did not know, but if a person had drowned, it felt heartless to simply leave them.

"Right. Let's do it, then."

"Okay, but it will mean we have to drain the water."

"Yeah..."

Unless it was particularly important, it was best not to meddle too much with the unknown, as it could often mean life or death. That was the very reason they'd left the room alone the previous day. Shiori looked around for an appropriate spot.

"Is it doable?" asked Alec.

"Yes, but it will take a little time. I don't want to make too big of a hole in case it has an adverse effect on the tower's stability."

Being that she was a complete novice when it came to the architectural structure of the tower, Shiori thought it best to err on the side of caution. It would be no good for her to accidentally bring the entire thing crumbling down upon them.

"Over there should work," she said.

Shiori decided on a spot in the wall where the water was deepest, then used her earth magic to bore a small square hole a few centimeters wide. The water began to move, and little by little, the water level dropped.

Just as Shiori had expected, the draining process took time. The pair sat on the stairs at the edge of the water, and watched as the water level dropped. Rurii took to playfully splashing around. The water draining outside might have formed a small pond, and such a thing might have been a problem for other adventurers were it summer. However, visitors to the tower were rare in winter—for now, the water would simply freeze, then melt and evaporate with the arrival of spring.

"Why do you think those Imperials came here?"

The question had just popped into Shiori's head. Alec had been watching Rurii with a grin but looked up at her.

"Hm?"

"That trio, I mean. Why would they go to so much trouble to come to a place like this?"

Their equipment was old and haggard. They'd lost the majority of

their supplies in battle with magical beasts. And yet, still, they continued on their journey. Alec's gaze lingered on the corridor past the main part of the floor.

"You know that the Empire is in the midst of a rebellion, right?"

"Yes."

According to the newspapers, the nobles in the remote parts of the Empire, unable to stand the tyranny, had conspired together to cause an uprising among the Empire's citizens. The newspapers had been filled with sensational headlines at the outbreak of the rebellion—things like "Puppet Emperor Powerless to React" and "Empire on the Brink of Extinction."

"It has always been a large country occupying a decent part of the continent, but as expansion grew out of control, military expenditure skyrocketed. Taxes grew to be unreasonable, which caused riots and rebellions in its states and territories. The local militia were already low on morale, and they couldn't put the rebels down—the lands began to fall and the Empire's power waned across the nation. These past ten years of military conscription meant less people to tend the farms, and therefore less tax income. But even then, the Empire's nobility refused to let go of the lives of luxury they lived before, and their riches ran short."

Alec explained that when this happened, many nobles went to former Imperial territory, searching through the relics of their ancestors in search of riches to keep themselves afloat. The Imperial trio were likely no different. The tower had, after all, once belonged to Imperial nobility—the trio that visited had probably come in search of treasure.

"They came all this way, only to find mere ruins, plundered of anything even remotely valuable. But even if there *were* still things of value here, they couldn't even return home now, if they wanted to."

At the outbreak of the rebellion, the Empire and the regions bordering it had locked down. The only people there now were the Imperials that had been there before the rebellion. If the trio wanted to return home, they could only do so once the dust had settled. But with word spreading that victory would go to the rebel forces, the Imperial trio would likely return to a changed country.

"It's tragic," Alec said, his eyes dropping to the floor.

"I see..."

The Imperials here had done nothing but come in search of hope—even though they likely knew it was an exercise in futility.

"Still, it's hard to sympathize with them," Shiori muttered.

It was a kind of karma. They had accumulated a debt over the years, and now they were expected to pay it back.

"I suppose so," said Alec. Rurii, at his feet, trembled in agreement.

“The water levels look to be settling.”

Alec stood to his feet. There was still water pooled at the corner of the wall, but the floor was visible now, which meant walking wasn't going to be an issue. He reached out a hand to help Shiori stand, and she looked out around the room. There was nothing out of the ordinary, and no sign of the Imperial trio either. She felt a sigh of relief inside of her.

They walked cautiously along the now slick floor, looking down at a puddle that had formed—and noticeably, still hadn't frozen over. There was a strong magical energy coming from within the muddied water. Upon closer look, they found small stones, glowing red—it was fire magic stones, and lots of them.

“Wow, more than I expected,” said Alec.

“Amazing,” uttered Shiori.

There was easily enough to fill both of their hands.

“They look like salmon roe,” she said.

Alec chuckled.

“That they do,” he said. “They're very similar.”

The red magic stones were about a centimeter wide each. If you picked them all up and put them in a bottle, it would have looked just like a bottle of fish eggs.

“Are they hot to the touch?” asked Shiori.

The stones had managed to keep a body of water from freezing over entirely, so she was curious. However, Alec shook his head.

“Not hot,” he said. “Merely warm.”

Alec took his gloves off and dipped a hand in the water, picking up a number of the stones. He put one in the palm of Shiori's hand, and she felt a warmth run through her.

“Oh, you're right,” she said, “it's so pleasant...”

“On their own, the stones only contain a small amount of energy, but the magic in them must have been magnified with so many of them so close together. That's why the water that should have frozen never did.”

“So that explains it. But...” Shiori's head tilted in thought. Rurii then shuffled, imitating her posture. “I wonder why there are so many. Do you think this is the treasure the Imperials were looking for?”

“No, there's no way this many stones could have stayed here untouched for so long. Based on the sheer amount of them, they were probably left by a falsk wisp.”

“Really? Wow...”

Falsk wisps were magical beasts, like little balls of fire, that gathered in the swamplands deep in the forest. They lacked a true physical form, and dissipated into the air when killed, meaning that very little research had been done on them. However, it was believed

they were like shreds of a spirit without intelligence. They could only be felled with magic attacks, and the strong magical energy that wrapped around their bodies was said to be in large part due to magic stones—it was for this reason that taking down a group of them resulted in quite the haul.

Their party had met with something of a calamity here on the third floor, but luckily, they had received such spoils as a result.

“So a falsk wisp makes a home of the tower, and then for some reason it dies...”

“In a fight with another beast, perhaps?” offered Shiori.

“I wonder... Well, we’ll need to take a look at that room to find out.”

In any case, it would be a waste to leave so many magic stones like this. They were small, yes, but selling all of them would earn them good coin—as such, the pair thought it best to gather what they could. Their hands were cold when they entered the water, but warmed quickly at the touch of the stones.

“You could put these in a bag and use them in place of a hot stone,” said Shiori.

“Indeed. Let’s make enough for everyone, then pass them around. We can split them all up between us later. I’m sure Annelie would like some too.”

They put the stones in small storage bags to create impromptu body warmers. Shiori took one and put it in her shirt, filling it with a gentle warmth. The rest she placed in a pouch along her belt. Rurii was poking, rolling, and rubbing at the gathered stones playfully. It seemed enamored by them.

“You want one?” asked Alec. The slime wobbled. “You’ve done us a lot of favors, so I don’t think anyone’s going to complain if you take one as a reward for yourself.”

Alec picked out an especially large stone among what was gathered and put it in front of the slime. Rurii trembled with joy, patting the stone before carefully placing it within its own body—it looked as though it would take it out to play with later.

Alec and Shiori smiled at the sight of the slime bouncing along happily with the magic stone in its body, then turned their attention to the corridor ahead.

“I’m going to check things out up there,” said Alec. “How about you? I don’t mind if you want to take a break back at camp. We’re liable to run into something rather unpleasant up ahead.”

He means the vanished human presence.

Alec was being kind by offering Shiori a choice.

“I want to go with you,” she said. “We made a decision to work together, as a team.”

Alec's eyes widened slightly with surprise, but his face soon filled with a smile.

"You're right," he said, chuckling. "You're exactly right. Then let's go, together."

"Lead the way."

Shiori closed the hole she'd made in the wall and stood to her feet. Ahead of them was a single, long corridor. Though it hadn't struck them in any particular way earlier, now there was a certain gloom about it. The water on the floor had already begun to freeze. Their boots could handle this, but it was still slippery, and still dangerous. For now, Shiori cast a warm wind to melt and dry the floors.

"Thanks," said Alec.

"You're most welcome."

They walked across the hall and stood at the entrance to the corridor, where their noses met with a damp, raw stench.

"The water in that room must have been there for quite some time," said Alec. "It's gone putrid. I'm so glad it's not summer."

The stench would have been much, much worse in a warmer season. As he spoke, Alec's gaze was drawn to a particular point. Shiori saw it too, and frowned.

"What is that?" she asked.

"What indeed...?"

Some ten meters ahead, in the middle of the corridor, was a black shape, taking up about half of the space. It hadn't been there a day earlier.

"I'll dry the floors ahead," said Shiori.

"Good idea."

After Shiori had worked her magic, the two of them ventured into the corridor.

As they walked up closer to the shape ahead, it became clear exactly what it was. The two adventurers let out a sigh of relief and chuckled.

"It's just wrecked furniture," said Alec.

"I thought it was a magical beast corpse..."

"What a fright."

It looked like it had once been shelving, perhaps, but it had been soaking in water for so long it had discolored. It had clearly gone rotten, then been taken on the flow of water, ending up in the corridor.

"It probably came out of that room, didn't it?"

"That's my guess. Oh... I see. So the falsk wisp got into it with these guys and they killed each other."

Alec pointed to some half-transparent objects caught in the

furniture. They had expanded on account of the water, but the umbrella shapes of the heads and the tentacles dangling from them were unmistakable.

“Snow jellyfish...”

Creatures which had the opposite magical affinity to a falsk wisp. The two varieties of magical beast had, for whatever reason, ended up in the same room, then killed each other. The falsk wisp had dissipated upon death, leaving its fire stones, while the jellyfish had simply fallen into the water that remained.

There were a few more jellyfish tangled up in the wrecked furniture, and Rurii poked and prodded them. Naturally, while they were in this state, the slime had no intention of eating them—it was just curious.

Shiori circled around to the other side of the furniture, then let out a gasp as she saw what was underneath it. She put a hand to her mouth.

“What’s wrong—?” started Alec, running over to her. “Oh...”

He brought Shiori into his arms as soon as he realized.

“It’s...it’s the mage,” he muttered.

Shiori looked up timidly at Alec’s face, then once more down at her feet. The blond-haired mage that they had encountered the previous day was facing the ceiling, his body sandwiched beneath the wrecked furniture. His skin was pale, his eyes were wide, and his arms were splayed out like a wooden doll’s. The edges of his still-wet hair were stained red.

“Looks like he hit his head when the water gushed out,” said Alec.

That was what they’d heard—a wavering of magical energy followed by a tremendous crash. This mage had forced the door open with his magic, only to face the full power of the water within.

Alec patted Shiori on the back kindly and gently, then let her go and knelt down by the mage’s body. He put a hand to the man’s nose and waited for a time, then moved his fingers to the man’s neck.

“His body is already freezing,” Alec said. “He’s not breathing.”

“I...I see...”

Silence filled the corridor. Alec watched over the mage for a time, then sighed, closed the man’s eyes with a hand, and gave Rurii a pat on the head.

“Could you help me?” he asked the slime. “I’d like to get this man free of the wreckage.”

The slime trembled a response and flattened itself out. It slid underneath the mage’s body while Alec got a grip underneath the furniture—as Alec lifted, the slime carried the body out.

“Thanks, Rurii,” said Shiori.

She created a ball of water as a token of gratitude, which the

slime drank with a happy wobble.

Alec crossed the mage's arms upon his chest.

"Clemens has the really good stuff, but I guess this'll have to do..." he muttered, taking a small bottle of wine from his pouch and pouring some of it upon the mage's lips—a parting gift and farewell to the fallen, perhaps. The mage was far from a friend to them, but anyone who had departed for the afterlife deserved at least this much respect. They honored the mage with a moment of silence—a funeral rite for those who passed away in the midst of a journey.

"To meet your end on a do-or-die journey into foreign country... I know he brought it on himself, but still, it's a pitiful way to go."

The mage had been a haughty, unpleasant man who was not against sacrificing others so that he might live. But even then it was clear that he'd been desperate. There was a goal he'd been pursuing. All the same, on that journey, he had lost his life—breathing his last on foreign soil, never to see his home again. It was a tragic end.

I, too, almost died in a world far from my own, within a darkness where light could not reach me.

These memories flashed through the back of Shiori's mind, then vanished again.

"Shiori," said Alec. The kindness of his voice tickled at her ears.

"I'm okay," she said, taking his hand. "Let me cleanse your hands."

"Thanks."

With a pure water spell she washed Alec's hands, then dried them with a gust of warm air. She also dropped some warm water on Rurii too—a little act of cleansing for the slime.

"Shall we move on?" asked Alec.

"Yes."

They gave the corpse of the mage a slight bow, then headed farther down the corridor. It was not long before they reached the broken doors of the room they had left untouched.

"Wow..." uttered Shiori. "He really didn't hold back."

"Looks like he gave it everything he had."

The doors into the room were a sorry sight, black and charred with burn marks, and barely hanging onto their hinges.

"They had to have known that if they broke these doors down, they'd be inviting a flood," said Alec.

"They hadn't had a proper meal or rest in such a long time... They might have been beyond even logical thought."

"That's very possible..."

A pained expression filled Alec's face as he stepped cautiously into the room. The interior of it was not so different from the others on the third floor, except that the floor had grown dark after having been

soaked for such a long time. Bits of wood and other debris were strewn across the floor. There was also a hole in the wall where one would have expected to find a window—perhaps it had simply crumbled away as a result of having been left unattended for so many years. Upon closer inspection, it seemed that it must not have been particularly long since that had happened. Being that there was nothing in their guild report referring to such an event, it must have happened *after* the last Tris adventurer had visited the tower.

“A hole this big, and you’re practically inviting the rain and the snow inside,” said Shiori.

“You can see where the rain water has flowed inside too—look at those marks.”

There would have been at least a few days of heavy rain since the summer. And come the winter, snow was an everyday occurrence. Then there was the direction in which the tower tilted. The hole faced the sky, while the doors—which opened inwards—faced downwards, which made conditions perfect for water and snow to gather. Even if the mage hadn’t broken the door down, at some point it would have simply collapsed on its own under the weight.

“We’ll have to inform the Guild and the local knights about this part of the tower. I don’t think tourists would come out this far or venture in, but still.”

“True... And in the summer, it’s easy for anyone to get here if they’re so inclined,” added Shiori.

If a part of the tower was already crumbling to pieces, it was likely that other sections would soon do the same. Thus, it was important to warn people—both tourists and adventurers alike.

“Oh...?”

At that moment, Shiori noticed another crumbled section of wall in the corner.

“What is that?”

It seemed Alec had noticed it too. This other hole in the wall was big enough for a person to pass through, but there were things wedged within it—wooden chests, by the looks of them. They were stacked up in front of the hole, blocking it. The boxes were larger than the width of the hole, which was probably why they’d gotten stuck instead of flowing out of the room when the doors had opened. Alec poked at them with his scabbard, and the chests fell to the ground with a rattle.

“They look like treasure chests,” said Shiori.

The lids on the long rectangular chests were rounded, with hinges keeping them closed. They were the sort of thing you’d expect to see in an adventure novel.

“And they may be exactly that,” said Alec. “The chests themselves

may have once been of value too. Look.”

Shiori followed Alec’s gesture. The now-discolored chests were scarred, likely from where people had gouged the decorations right out of them.

“Everything inside the chests...yes, that’s gone too,” said Shiori. “Or perhaps they were empty to begin with?”

“Who knows? At a glance, this looks to have been a secret room. Hard to imagine someone filling it with empty boxes.”

Rurii slipped into the hole, then wobbled as if to tell them it was safe. Shiori and Alec peered in through the crumbled opening. The room was two meters wide on each side, and filled with opened chests.

“They’re all empty.”

“Yeah. And it looks like all the decorations on them have been pried loose and taken. They probably took whatever jewels were on the chests, and the pedestals they sat on too.”

The chests themselves were too heavy to carry—that was why only the decorations had been taken.

“This place really has been cleaned out of anything and everything valuable, hasn’t it?” said Shiori.

“It was either the royal army after the territorial reclamation operation, or the Empire’s own citizens. This place is easy to reach with a horse and cart in the summer. Getting at the valuables would have been all too easy.”

And that was exactly why, outside of adventurers looking to get some practical training in the field, nobody came to this tower of their own volition. Annelie saw artistic merit in the location, but her reasons were an exception. The trio of Imperial adventurers had risked their lives to get here—a place that was, for all intents and purposes, entirely empty.

Shiori looked down at her feet. An emptiness filled her at the thought. At that very moment, Alec flinched and put a hand to his sword. Rurii, too, moved in front of Shiori—it hadn’t turned red yet, but the slime was clearly on guard.

Footsteps. Slow, irregular footsteps, coming their way. Shiori cast her search magic, and sensed two weak presences approaching. Alec took a step forward. A few moments later, a man appeared at the doorway—one of the Imperial trio.

As pale as a ghost... Is this where that expression came from?

The swordsman’s face was so pale and empty that it was a wonder he was even still alive and walking. He looked dead on his feet, and turned his gaze around slowly, carrying a woman in his arms. When his eyes landed upon Alec, his body began to shake, and he fell to his knees as if he had nothing left. But even then he held tight to his

companion—a clear sign that she was very important to him.

“Are you okay?” Alec asked, running over to them.

Alec had not let his guard down yet, but he could see that the remaining two of the trio had no more fight in them. Shiori and Rurii followed after him.

“I’m...fine. But please help... Help Julia...”

The man was trembling violently, and barely able to squeeze the words out. Still, he refused to put the woman on the floor, which remained cold and wet, and instead held her out to Alec. The woman, fighting to stay conscious, was wrapped tight in a blanket, but it was likely that she was naked underneath—Alec could see her bare neck and collarbone peeking out from the top of the blanket. Her clothes must have been drenched.

The swordsman, on the other hand, remained still dressed in his wet equipment. The edges of his hair had frozen over. It was amazing that he was still alive so long after the flooding.

“You’re anything but fine,” said Alec. “You’ve got chills and you look like a ghost.”

“Alec,” said Shiori, “I’ll dry them. At this rate, they’ll...”

The two Imperial adventurers were just barely hanging on. Left as they were, they would die.

“Good idea. Go ahead.”

“Right.”

Shiori cast warm air, drying the man’s drenched equipment, his clothing, and his hair. A little life returned to the man’s expression, along with some surprise. Ignoring this, Shiori then brought her hands towards the woman, Julia. Julia was wrapped in a blanket, but it was clear that she was still freezing.

Shiori sent her warm air into the blanket. Julia’s eyes opened slightly, and her lips twitched, but she did not speak. Perhaps she was trying to say thank you.

The adventurers had been warmed up a little, but this was far from enough.

“Alec...”

The two Imperial adventurers were companions of the man that had threatened them and their clients with violence. And yet...

Alec nodded. He understood the feelings in Shiori’s voice, likely because he felt exactly the same way.

“These people need aid. Let’s take them back to camp. I doubt that Annelie will oppose our decision, but I’ll take responsibility for what may come.”

“Then I will shoulder that same responsibility.”

Shiori looked Alec in the eye. Her rank, abilities, and experience were lower than his, and so she could not always bear the same

responsibilities. Be that as it may have been, however, she had made up her mind.

“We’re partners now,” she said. “Let me carry the same weight.”

They had decided to be together, and that meant sharing everything. Shiori did not want them to be partners simply when it was convenient for her.

“Shiori, I—” Alec was shocked. “Perhaps I keep selling you short. You really are...”

He trailed off. When he spoke next, it was with a confident smile.

“You’re right,” he said. “Let’s hurry back to camp.”

“Okay,” said Shiori, smiling back.

Rurii wobbled at their feet. It reached out a feeler and poked at the woman in Alec’s arms.

“What is it, Rurii?”

The slime then reached out with two feelers as if to gesture for the woman.

“Wait... You mean you’ll carry her?”

Rurii’s trembling response was clear: *You betcha.*

“I guess asking if you can or not would be a stupid question,” muttered Alec.

The slime had, after all, done so before. Although it was only a short distance, it had just carried two people upstairs a little while ago. In the past, it had also carried someone a much longer distance—that person being Shiori herself, when she’d been abandoned by her party and left for dead.

“You’re as much a companion to us as anyone,” said Alec. “Thank you.”

Rurii trembled again: *She’s in good hands.* Then it spread out along the floor, and Alec placed the woman gently upon the slime, which wrapped her up carefully so as not to let her fall.

Shiori and Alec knelt by the swordsman to lend him their shoulders, then slowly helped him to his feet.

“We’re going to walk now,” said Shiori. “It’ll be a little tiring, but hang in there, okay?”

The man responded with a vague nod of the head.

“All right then,” said Alec. “Let’s head back.”

It wasn’t too far a distance back to their campsite, but for a man who could barely move, it felt like a marathon. Still, it was clear that the man did not want for things to end here—he was trying to survive, to live. He walked on, slowly, pushing on with each step. How could anyone abandon a person in such need? True, he had to take responsibility for his actions...but just how many could have abandoned someone who still clung to life like this?

Shiori knew that they could offer help, and that was why she also

knew that abandoning the two Imperial adventurers here would mean that a part of her was beyond redemption—the part of her, still tucked away deep in her memories, from that day long, long ago. The part of her lost within the darkness of that labyrinth, half dead and unable to move.

Even now, she sometimes dreamed of that day. And those dreams always ended with her feeling entirely powerless. Whenever she woke, she couldn't help but wonder if the life she lived now was simply an illusion—the last dream she would ever have as she actually remained lying in that dark labyrinth, the life fading from her eyes.

But it's not true. I am here, now, and I am alive.

Shiori had someone to pull her by the hand into an embrace, and to tell her that her life was no dream. She had someone by her side to warmly and kindly remind her that the world she lived in was real.

And that's why...I want to save myself from that day.

The nightmare was over now. Shiori wanted to accept that for what it was, and move on.

“Just a little further,” said Alec. “We only need to make it up the stairs. You can do it.”

The man pushed on with their support, slowly climbing the stairs. Clemens and Nadia were shocked to see them upon their return, and their eyes bulged in further surprise when they realized that Rurii carried a woman wrapped in a blanket.

“They need help. They've got serious chills. We have to warm them immediately.”

“Got it,” said Clemens, helping to support the swordsman. “Is it just the two of them?”

The meaning in Clemens's glance was clear, but when Alec replied with a subtle shake of the head, Clemens got the message.

“For now, let's focus on keeping them warm,” said Clemens. “Shiori, can you prepare hot drinks for them? Something sweet if possible.”

“I'm on it.”

Clemens had been born and raised in colder lands, and the best procedures in these situations came naturally to him—he spread a fur sheet along the floor while Nadia set light to a fuel cube and started a campfire. Then they put the man on the sheet and wrapped him in it.

Julia, who was in her underwear since her wet clothes had been discarded, was dressed in Nadia's spare clothes. She was then wrapped in a clean blanket and placed gently by the fire.

“Shiori, can you pass me the fire stones we gathered earlier?” asked Alec. “They'll come in handy.”

“Oh, I see. One second.”

She took the small bag of fire stones and passed them to Alec, who

placed them at the man's neck and feet, and inside Julia's blanket.

"Something warm and sweet..." muttered Shiori. "Ginger tea should do it."

She whipped out a bottle of sugared ginger and quickly mixed it with hot water.

"Think you can stomach a little tea?" asked Nadia. "Let's sit you up and get a little of this into you."

The two Imperial adventurers gave meek nods. Alec and Clemens helped them to sit up, and the Imperial adventurers sipped at their drinks.

"It's been a good amount of time since the third floor flooded," said Alec. "It's a wonder you held on as long as you did."

In Alec's words was a question: *how?* When Shiori and Alec found the two adventurers, the swordsman's hair was already beginning to freeze. They'd been left in the cold, drenched from head to toe, for a long time. Ordinarily, walking around would have been impossible—most would be frozen to the point of fighting for consciousness.

"We picked up a few fire stones..." said the man, his Imperial accent clear in his muttered words. "Without them, we'd have..."

The Imperial adventurers' baggage was drenched and useless, but it had flowed into an area where they'd found some fire stones and an old blanket with which to stave off the cold. But with no way to dry their clothes, they were left waiting for the inevitable—so the swordsman had made the decision to use the last of his energy to search for help.

Just then, Annelie and her aides poked their heads out of their tent. They had heard all the noise and were shocked to find it came from the two Imperial adventurers, now wrapped up and sitting by the fire.

"I apologize," said Alec. "I realize I brought them here without permission."

Annelie replied with a wry grin.

"No, it's fine. They needed your help, didn't they? And in any case, we'd discussed taking them with us depending on the circumstances. It doesn't seem like we're enemies anymore."

Perhaps the two Imperials felt that she was the party's leader, for they attempted to sit up straighter and more properly before her. Annelie stopped them both and told them to be at ease. Her voice was gentle and kind as she spoke.

"And what are your names?" she asked.

"I am Frol Rakhmanin. That's Julia Rakhmanin."

"Oh—you're siblings?"

"No...cousins. Master Sergey too..." Frol then paused for a moment before asking, "Did you find him? Master Sergey...?"

He asked the question hesitantly, perhaps afraid to mention the name of the man that had threatened the people who'd saved his own life. But in his expression was defeat. It was possible that Frol already knew the answer to his question—that the mage called Sergey was no longer of this world.

“He suffered a blow to his head,” said Alec. “When we found him he was no longer breathing. We laid him down in the third-floor corridor.”

Frol was silent for a time, but did not seem especially shaken. When Alec added that they had given him a simple send-off, the two Imperial adventurers bowed politely.

“You seem at peace,” said Annelie.

“The moment we left our home, we knew this was a possibility. That we even made it as far as we did is, in itself, a miracle.”

Sergey had a lot of magical power, but lacked skill for his rank. Frol knew that he was likely the stronger of the two, and had accordingly done his best to protect his master. Sergey had been the second son of a count, while Frol and Julia were from a branch family. According to the rules governing the Imperial Adventurers' Guild, branch family members were not allowed to attain ranks higher than direct descendants of the same family line. The Empire placed an extremely strong importance on family name and rank, and these rules were to ensure societal privilege was maintained.

Annelie tried to ignore the details, but Alec and the other adventurers were left frowning. Even Dennis looked like he'd eaten something disagreeable.

“But why did you force that door open?” asked Annelie. “You had to have known what would happen if you opened it.”

“That particular room hid family treasures,” said Frol. “This tower once belonged to the Rakhmanin family. Our duty was to retrieve the treasures in this tower and bring them back to help reestablish the duke's position of power. To do that, we *had* to get access to that room.”

“Hidden treasures...”

Shiori couldn't bear to hear it. She looked up at Alec, who gazed down at the adventurers with sadness in his eyes.

“If you are talking about the treasure chests in a hidden room...they're empty,” he said.

Alec's words plunged the two Imperials into silence. But a moment later, Frol laughed. With his eyebrows drooped and his mouth twisted, it looked to Shiori like he might also be crying.

“Yes, we had expected that might be the case,” said Frol. “It has been a hundred and fifty years since the tower was abandoned. It is so close to town too—it seems unfathomable that it would have

remained untouched. The moment we entered, I did not have high hopes.”

The tower had been plundered to the extent that even the magic stones that powered the candleholders were gone.

“I tried to tell him, but from the moment Sergey knew that the door was locked tight, he thought maybe it was still untouched. He wouldn’t let it go. He thought it was worth opening.”

“And so he forced it open with his magic?”

“Yes...”

“Even though you knew it was filled with water?”

“We’d noticed, but Sergey refused to listen to us. He didn’t have anything else. We were there to bring back valuables to reestablish the family, but he already had his sights set on being crowned the family successor...”

Only nobles, royals, and others of high stature ever benefited in the Empire. With tax revenue plummeting, there was little room for generosity, and outside of direct descendants, the majority of noble families had simply become commoners. But for nobles of the Empire, commoner status was no different from slavery. The Empire itself had little power to spare, and commoners without a talent for sales were resigned to becoming serfs or otherwise joining the military. It was that or attempt a living as adventurers.

“But with the rebellion going on and the borders closed...” said Frol, “we’d be helpless even if there was a treasure waiting for us.”

And perhaps that was what Sergey wanted—for they, as descendants of the tower’s owners, to die within its walls as a triple suicide.

The campsite was gripped by a heavy silence, and it was Annelie who finally broke it.

“In any case, we will take you with us, and upon our return, we will hand you over to the knights. I assume this is acceptable to you?”

The two Imperials nodded obediently. Annelie gave Dennis, who had been standing beside her, deep in thought, a tap on the back.

“I must say, I’m famished,” she said, rubbing her stomach and grinning. “Do you mind, Shiori?”

Shiori was stunned for a moment. But she realized that this was Annelie’s way of clearing the air of the heavy mood. It was also considerably past lunchtime, now. Even if she started preparations immediately, by the time food was ready it would already be early evening.

“Let’s have an early dinner then, shall we?” said the housekeeping mage. “We still have the hare from yesterday, so I’ll make something hearty.”

Walt had been a quiet observer until now, but Shiori’s words

brought a cheer out of him. Dennis cast him an annoyed glare, and the party erupted into laughter. The lighter mood provided a bit of relief to everyone, and Shiori quickly opened up her knapsack to get started on dinner preparations.

“I’m so glad we have such a generous client,” she said to Alec. “It would have broken my heart if we’d been told to leave those two to their own devices.”

“Yeah...”

It could not be ignored that the Imperials were survivors from a party that had destroyed public property, threatened another party with death, and caused a dangerous incident that might well have killed all of them. Whether or not the remaining survivors had actually intended any of that, they had still been party to it. With this in mind, it wouldn’t have been surprising if Annelie had wanted nothing to do with them.

Still, I’m so glad that it was this country into which I fell.

The thought crossed Shiori’s mind as she began chopping meat for the stew. When she heard rumors about the Empire, and when she thought of the Imperial who had so callously agreed to her being abandoned in that labyrinth, she couldn’t help but remember. And after meeting Sergey and hearing about it more directly from Frol, she felt it in her very heart.

The domain of Torisval was a region connected to the Empire. What if she had fallen into that land instead of this one—on one side of the border instead of the other? She was a rare and unique Easterner in these lands, and she would have met a fate far harsher than mere slavery. The thought of it sent a shiver down Shiori’s spine.

“I’m so glad it was big brother who found me,” she muttered. “So glad it was Torisval I fell into. If I’d ended up in the Empire’s lands...I’d be dead right now, or otherwise a slave.”

Her thoughts and feelings flowed from her mouth in the words she spoke, and she continued to go about her preparations. That was why she didn’t notice when Alec, who was helping her, paused what he was doing. Clemens, too, who was seeing to his weapons, raised his head. Meanwhile, Nadia sent them both a deep, meaningful look.

“‘Fell’?” whispered Alec.

3

The scent of the well-simmered hare stew and skewers filled the air.

“When it comes to hare meat, it’s just got to be skewers!” said Walt. “The herbs really accentuate the unique game flavors. Delicious!”

“Skewers are great, I agree, but hare meat is best in stewed cuisine,” said Dennis. “That deep, unique flavor soaks into the vegetables. Because the fat melts into the soup, it’s not too heavy either.”

“I had thought that horned hare meat would have more of that game food stench, but it’s very easy to eat,” added Annelie. “It’s got a luxurious flavor layered with a certain wild scent. I could get used to this—perhaps I should start raising beasts of my own...”

“Annie...”

The Tris hare cuisine served in the city eateries had a very strong smell, and for this reason many who lived in the kingdom didn’t like it. But in the case of horned hares, the scent added a certain depth to its flavor—and Annelie seemed to approve of that.

While the nobles bickered playfully over the best ways to prepare horned hare, Frol and Julia ate slowly from bowls of porridge which Shiori had made especially for them, happiness written all over their faces. The porridge had been cooked up in a separate pot and contained hare and root vegetables—all of it simmered so it practically melted on the tongue. It was a dish Shiori had decided to whip up after considering their physical conditions.

Sitting by Alec’s side, Shiori smiled at the sight of the lively campsite dinner.



"I'm so glad you like it," she said. "I only learned how to cook with hare meat once I arrived in Storydia, so I don't feel particularly confident with it."

Alec couldn't help blinking in surprise. Hare was by no means a rare meat. Before hare farms were common, they were standard game meats along with birds. And now that they were raised especially for eating, hares were even more common.

"They don't eat hare where you come from?" he asked.

"Well... I believe we ate it in the past, but it's less heard of now. Hares are seen more as pets now, and because of this many people oppose eating them."

"I see. I guess food culture differs wherever you go."

Alec looked at Shiori as he spoke. He couldn't help feeling something strange in her use of a particular word: *now*.

So it still exists...?

Shiori had said that she would not see her home country again—it was a place that she could no longer reach. He had always assumed that this meant the nation had since fallen, and in fact many thought the same way. However, it struck him as odd that Shiori did not speak of it in the past tense. The way she talked about her home, it felt as if she thought its people were still alive. That, and...

She "fell" into Torisval, huh...?

It was such a strange choice of words—as though for all the world she really had fallen from the heavens above. Perhaps it was best to simply ask her about it. At the same time, he worried that doing so might only make her uncomfortable. Perhaps one day she would opt to tell him herself...but that time was not here, and not now.

For a while, Shiori had revealed nothing of her past to any of them, but as of late she had begun talking a little more of old memories and her home. Alec knew that this was because she was beginning to feel comfortable enough to do so. And it was for this very reason that Alec did not want to barge into her heart and force its doors open. He could tell that, even now, there was something about the thought of her home that still pained her.

"Alec? Something wrong?"

Shiori stared at him, puzzled. She'd felt his gaze on her, and her cheeks were flushed a gentle red. Her black eyes sparkled, reflecting the light of the campfire.

"No, everything's fine," he replied. "Just thinking about how beautiful you are."

"Erm. What...? Uh..."

The words were a gentle, teasing way to brush Shiori off, but they only made her turn redder. Alec smiled at the sight, and put away his

thoughts of digging into her past.

It was the middle of the night. Alec was on guard duty first, sitting across from Clemens as they drank from small bottles of alcohol. He had politely declined his friend's ominously named recommendations and stuck with his own spirits. As he enjoyed the fruity scent and smooth taste of his drink, a figure moved restlessly towards them.

"Nadia."

Though she usually wore her hair up, at this moment she had it flowing into a neat ponytail for bed. She flicked the hair over her shoulder and took a seat by the fire.

"Can't sleep?" Alec asked.

"Just a little something I can't get off my mind," she replied.

Something she evidently felt she couldn't bring up until Shiori was asleep.

"Just how much do the two of you know about her?" asked Alec, not wasting any time.

Clemens and Nadia shook their heads.

"To be honest, next to nothing," said Clemens.

"I see..."

"How about you?" asked Nadia. "Has she told you anything?"

Alec managed a pained grin.

"Only what happened with Akatsuki," he said. "That, and...she has a real brother, seven years older than her. Apparently he's the overprotective sort."

"How interesting," said Nadia. "I feel like I know someone just like him."

"You and me both," added Clemens.

The three adventurers shared a quiet chuckle, but their faces hardened again soon afterwards. There was silence around the campfire until Alec spoke.

"*'I'm so glad it was Torisval I fell into.'* That's what she said."

The words felt like they dripped with meaning.

"About that," said Clemens, who, having finished the rest of his bottle, now tucked it away. "Zack said something quite strange before as well."

"Really?"

"Yeah. About when he first found her."

It was in the forests near Torisval. Zack had been on his way home after a suppression quest when he was struck by a strange wavering in the space nearby. Directly afterwards, he'd sensed a human presence followed by the sound of something heavy falling from up high. It was Shiori. She didn't look like an ordinary traveler, and she wasn't carrying anything on her person—just the clothes on

her back and a single shoe. The woman had, for all intents and purposes, appeared in the forest out of nowhere.

“Naturally, Zack felt that something wasn’t right about the situation, so he investigated the surrounding area, but he said there were no signs of people having come or gone from where he found her.”

“Nothing?”

“Not a thing. Being that it was the forest, you’d *have* to leave traces if you’d been there. But there wasn’t anything—no signs of humans or horse tracks, nor of a caravan—not a single sign to point to someone having snuck into the forest.”

Which was why Zack had said this: “*It was like she’d simply fallen from the sky.*”

“You’d think that kind of thing would be utterly impossible,” said Nadia.

“Right... Except that we’re talking about a former military officer for the second prince having done the investigation. If there had been any clues, Zack wouldn’t have missed them.”

Rumor had it that Zack had once been in the Knights’ Intelligence Division, where he was involved in espionage. These were not mere jokes told over drinks either—there was likely truth to them.

“So what? She fell?” asked Alec.

Zack’s words seemed to support Shiori’s own.

“There are a few details about the girl that are quite curious,” said Nadia, casting her eyes upon Shiori, wrapped up in her blanket as she slept. “The clothes she was wearing when she arrived were made of a material I’d never seen before.”

“Seriously?” asked Clemens. “There are materials that even *you’ve* never seen before?”

Nadia hailed from the former Kingdom of Litoanya, where the textile industry prospered. She had been raised in a family that managed many spinning mills and textile factories. Nadia thus knew fabrics very, very well, and yet even she could not explain Shiori’s clothing.

“At a glance it looked like silk, but the sheen and texture of it were different. Later, she told me it was called ‘synthetic fiber.’”

Unfortunately, those articles of clothing—Shiori’s last link to her home—had been sold off by her former party members. In doing so, they had taken from her the only thing through which she could point towards her own original identity.

“There was something about her hands too,” added Nadia. “She has the rugged hands of a seasoned adventurer now, but when I first saw her, she had dainty, beautiful hands right down to her nails—certainly too well manicured and kept to be the hands of a

commoner.”

Shiori had arrived with the hands of a noblewoman, dressed in a clean, unknown silklike fabric. This had led some to believe that she was perhaps a servant or an aide for a noble from some far-off country. However, Shiori had denied all of this. She’d told them that she had been involved in clerical work in her home country, and that her clothing was not particularly special—rather, it was entirely commonplace.

All that could be discerned, in the end, was that she had come from a wealthy, civilized country. The problem then was that even Shiori herself could not explain where that country was. It did not exist on any maps, and thus was in a place she could no longer reach. Almost as if...

“It’s like she really did fall from the heavens,” said Alec.

All three of the adventurers turned to Shiori as she let out a little breath and rolled over—she was blissfully in slumber, her face framed by her black hair.

“How about asking her?” offered Clemens. “You might find she’ll open up about it.”

However, even Clemens himself didn’t look like he believed his own words.

“Let me ask the two of you something. Could *you* ask her, if you were me?” asked Alec.

Could you put her on the spot like that?

“Who are you, and where did you come from?”

Clemens and Nadia responded with silence. They shook their heads.

“I couldn’t...” admitted Clemens. “As curious as I am, if she doesn’t want to talk about it, there may well be something she still can’t discuss.”

“I wouldn’t want to force her,” said Nadia. “I don’t want to put her through any more than she’s already had to go through.”

Alec wanted to know more about Shiori—she was, after all, the woman he loved. But at the same time, he did not want to see the placid look upon her face twisted with sadness.

He stood quietly from the campfire and walked over to the sleeping Shiori. He knelt down and put a gentle hand to the warmth of her cheek. She was an enigma, almost ethereal, and yet she was strong, kind, and adaptable. He adored her, and all he wanted was for her to be happy and at ease for the rest of her life.

Chapter 2: Melting Hearts

1

“Hrm... Winter expeditions always make the shoulders tight...” said Shiori as she stretched and massaged her arms.

Shiori had woken up for the morning shift with an ache in her shoulders. It left her with a sore, hunched-over posture—a reaction to the cold, yes, but also simply a result of the heavy knapsack she carried.

“Maybe I’ll get myself a massage when we return,” she muttered.

“A splendid idea...” said Nadia, kneading her own neck and shoulders. “Perhaps I’ll join you. I must admit, I’m not a fan of this aging process...”

The woman chuckled wryly as she folded her blanket and got ready for the day ahead.

Rurii, who had been on the floor doing its daily stretching routine, poked out a feeler and waved good morning.

“Morning, Rurii,” replied Shiori.

The slime wobbled in response and then popped into its usual dumpling shape. Rurii never forgot to do its morning and evening stretches, and Shiori wondered if it was because slimes, too, sometimes found themselves with aches and pains. She didn’t actually know if Rurii even had muscles to ache with, but she was certain there was meaning to the slime’s daily routine.

“For breakfast, let’s make horned hare dumpling soup with pancakes.”

Shiori used her magic to crush and break down the harder-to-eat, bonier parts of the hare to make meatballs. Putting them in a soup with root vegetables was sure to be filling and help warm the body.

Frol and Julia would likely be fine with porridge again—she could also separate out some of the soup and simmer it until it was soft. Based on their conditions yesterday, it looked like their stomachs were in good shape, so they could handle something with a little more solid food.

As the soup came to a boil, the wonderful scent of it filled the room. The scent of meat tickled her nose as she indulged in a little taste—it was a unique aroma that served to heighten the soup’s flavor.

“I might not be a fan of Tris hares, but horned hares are quite tasty. I don’t like them as much as Annelie, but still, I could get used

to this,” said Shiori, satisfied. “Okay—what next?”

With the soup done, all that was left was to make the pancake mix and cook it, which left her free until the others woke. She could join Nadia on guard duty and update her portable bestiary with what she’d learned on the expedition so far, or she could organize her own notes.

As she was thinking about what she wanted to do, Shiori looked down at Alec, still asleep on the floor. His blanket had fallen from his shoulders. She went over and fixed it to keep him warm, and he reached out with a hand to clasp her own. He was still asleep, but perhaps sensed her presence all the same. Shiori smiled and rubbed his hand gently. When she stood to her feet again, it was with his gentle warmth spreading through her body. But as she shot a casual glance to the Imperial adventurers by the campfire, she paused.

Oh?

Though sleeping, the two looked to be in pain, which brought a frown to Shiori’s brow. Was she imagining it? She looked more closely at the two Imperials wrapped in their blankets. Their faces were pale and covered in sweat, and their cheeks were an unnatural red. Even breathing looked to be an ordeal. Shiori reached out fearfully and touched their cheeks.

“Something wrong?” asked Nadia, who had noticed Shiori’s action.

“Big sister...”

Nadia could tell by Shiori’s tone of voice that something was up, and she came running.

“Oh my...” she uttered after touching their cheeks. “These fevers are terrible. This is the last thing we need.”

“What should we do?”

“They need to see a doctor. This is quite bad.”

If their fevers worsened, it could be fatal for the two Imperials, who were already weak. Perhaps sensing the change in the air, Alec and Clemens both woke and got up. After checking on the Imperials themselves, they too wore the same furrowed brows as Nadia.

“This is not good,” said Alec. “We’re going to be in a tough spot trying to carry two sick people while we keep up our protection duties.”

If anyone was going to carry the Imperials, it would have to be Alec and Clemens. Nadia and Shiori didn’t have the strength for it. On the other hand, they couldn’t possibly ask Dennis and Walt—their clients—to shoulder such a responsibility.

However, if Alec and Clemens carried the Imperials, they’d be a party without vanguards—the two men would be unable to respond to threats quickly. Even if Nadia used her magic to buy them time, it simply wasn’t realistic—they’d have to place the two sick adventurers

on the ground every time they encountered a beast. Then there was their baggage to consider, which would have to be spread evenly throughout the party. Some of it would have to be left behind. No matter how they thought about it, the journey would become more dangerous.

“What if someone left now to call the knights?”

“That might be the most realistic option...”

All eyes were on Alec. With potential snow bear and snow jellyfish encounters on the way back, handling them would require both strength *and* magic. This made Alec, the party’s magic swordsman, the most suitable choice. Clemens and Nadia were also A-rankers, but each of them lacked what the other had—which could put them in trouble if they traveled solo.

This was not to say that Alec would be completely fine on his own. He would have to walk through snowy paths for a whole day alone. In the snowy seasons, the area was known for its magical beasts, and traveling solo was not recommended where it could be avoided.

“But...even if Alec did go...” muttered Shiori, unable to finish her sentence.

Her fellow adventurers let out deep sighs. They knew what she was getting at—however quickly Alec moved, it would be a two-day trip to reach the knights and bring them back. Heading back to town after that would add another day. The Imperials might not have the energy to hold out that long. Every choice came with risk, and it put someone in danger.

“Still, sending Alec is our best option,” said Nadia.

And she was right. It was the safest of their current choices. The party was fortunate enough to still have a surplus of rations. Rather than put the clients and themselves at risk, sending their strongest member ahead while they waited was, indeed, the most realistic option. In this case, even if Alec couldn’t make it on time, the responsibility would be Frol and Julia’s—it was they who had decided to come to this place on their reckless journey, knowing full well what dangers awaited them. And had they not been saved yesterday, they most surely would not have survived another night by themselves.

But...

Shiori bit her lip. She wanted to help them. Alec did too. However, given the circumstances, Alec would be the one putting himself in the greatest danger. Shiori wanted to carry the same weight that he did. To share the same responsibilities. But she knew that because of the difference in their ranks, abilities, and levels of experience, he would shoulder the greater burden. She knew that, and yet...

I hate having the realization pushed on me like this...

Alec dropped into thought for a time, then looked at Shiori. She nodded. She, too, had a job to do—making sure that their clients and the sick were kept warm and well-looked-after in the two days that he would be away.

“In any case,” he said, “let’s bring this up with Annelie.”

It was some time before everyone was scheduled to be up and about, but they needed her permission, and quickly. When the margravine took a look at the two Imperials, she nodded in agreement.

“Yes,” she said. “You should leave immediately. But will you be all right on your own? Shouldn’t you take another person with you?”

“Though I’d very much love to, we don’t know what’s going to happen,” replied Alec. “I want to leave the bulk of our fighting force here. I don’t intend to die out in the snow, but if I’m not back in two days, you’ll have to decide on another plan.”

If he doesn’t come back...

Shiori felt something constrict around her heart, and the tiniest of moans escaped her lips. It was their first job together as partners, and now they would be separated. On top of that, they now had to consider the worst possible outcome.

Don’t leave me. Take me with you.

She wanted to hold Alec tight and speak these words, but she scolded herself for having the thoughts, and kept herself under control.

At that moment, Frol let out a pained sigh and shuffled in place.

“Leave us...” he uttered, his voice rasping. “You have saved us twice already. We do not wish to trouble you further.”

The Imperial let out another pained breath and chuckled at his own predicament.

“Our master is dead. It is inevitable that the Empire will be toppled by the rebels. There is no saving our home any longer. If our fate is death also, then let this tower be our gravestone. We wish only the grace to—”

“Stop it.”

The low voice cut Frol off, and Dennis walked out from the group. The light of the campfire had turned his red hair a fierce scarlet, and he reached out for Frol’s collar. But then he stopped himself—perhaps giving up on the idea of shaking a man who was so weak. Instead, he knelt down and he looked Frol in the eyes with an intense glare.

“Stop it,” he said again. His face was framed by his fiery red hair, and his forget-me-not eyes sparkled with emotion. “You ignore your duties as nobles but reap the benefits, then you almost get strangers killed in an expedition to a foreign land? What kind of a gravestone is

that? Grace, you say? Are you not merely running away? Is that what you want? Do you intend to shirk your responsibilities and take the easy way out? Why did you drop to your knees yesterday, begging us for food? It was because you wished to live, was it not? You wanted to survive, so badly that you would bow before strangers to do so. If you have that spirit within you, the courage to find a way, *any* way, then do not give up now!”

Frol’s eyes went wide. Dennis went on.

“Survive,” he said. “Live. Take responsibility for what you have done. Fight with everything you have to make up for the life you have lived! That is the last duty you have left as a noble of the Empire!” Dennis let out a breath, then looked up once more into Frol’s eyes. “To take the easy way out, to simply die—that is the coward’s path. There are no choices left to you when you are dead.”

Dennis’s words were a message—to the Imperials, yes, but also to himself.

After a long silence, Frol managed a short nod. When Dennis saw this, he turned to the rest of the group.

“Even if Alec leaves on his own, I fear that these two will not last that long. Can we not carry them between the four of us?” he asked.

“Dennis is right,” said Annelie. “Depending on the weather, the medics may not be able to leave right away. We can’t send Alec out on his own on snowy paths like that for people whose lives may well be lost while he’s gone.”

Alec glanced at his three fellow adventurers. They were all glad that their clients had offered to help. Shiori looked down at her feet, where Rurii was wobbling. Then the slime wobbled again—it was trying to say something.

I’m here too, she felt it say. I’ll help.

Shiori knelt down by the slime.

“Rurii...you’ll really help us? You’ll help us to carry the two adventurers?”

The slime replied with a confident wobble.

But of course!

“Thank you, Rurii.”

The slime reached out with a feeler and rubbed Shiori’s hand a few times.

Think nothing of it.

“Rurii...” uttered Alec, touched by the slime’s gesture.

The adventurers looked at each other and nodded.

“That makes *five* of us who can help carry the sick,” said Alec. “We can make things easier with muscle-boosting magic. Dennis, Walt...the two of you aren’t used to magic, so the aftereffects will leave you exhausted and aching for a few days. What would you like

to do?”

“Aftereffects be damned,” said Dennis. “We’ll take the magic and rest up upon our return.”

“Indeed,” said Walt. “Such is the all-encompassing kindness of our wonderful lord. I’m certain her generosity will see us with at least a week off to recover.”

“Oh, you two,” said Annelie, giggling. “Very well. The two of you have accommodated my whims all the way to this tower, so I’ll even throw in a special bonus for you.”

“Yes! That’s our Annie!” cried Walt. “Time to flex these workhorse muscles!”

“Great, then we’ll leave as soon as we’ve eaten. Shiori, can you prepare the food?”

Alec gave Shiori a pat on the back. Rurii trembled with confidence. Shiori smiled and nodded.

“I’m on it!” she said.

Everyone in the party filled their bellies with warm food to prepare for the trek back to town. Julia, still lacking an appetite, was fed some warm water with berry syrup, while Frol, who had a little more energy, was given some soup minus the meatballs and vegetables.

After breakfast, Alec’s and Clemens’s baggage was divided up between the party. Meanwhile, Alec informed everyone of the plan.

“We’ll do our best to get back to town before the end of the day. Magical beast encounters are less likely the closer we get to town, so even though it’s a little dangerous, we’ll press on even after sunset. If for some reason we can’t make it as a group, I’ll go on ahead to call for help. Anything we don’t need for the return journey, we leave behind.”

The party went about preparing their luggage as per Alec’s instructions. All of the food aside from the rations was put in Shiori’s knapsack, which had more room thanks to all the cooking she’d done over the course of the expedition. Things like the bath items and other items that could be easily bought and replaced were left at the tower. The extra space allowed for the blankets and tents to be spread around more evenly.

“Guess I’ve got no choice but to leave behind all my alcohol save for the stuff we use as smelling salts,” muttered Clemens.

“You’re better off for it,” said Alec. “That stuff is cursed.”

“I do have more at home, though, you realize?”

“Then throw that away too.”

Shiori was puzzled by their conversation—it was one that only Alec and Clemens seemed to truly understand. The two finished

preparing their bags, then Frol and Julia were dressed in warm clothes and covered in blankets to prepare them for the cold. Finally, the barrier stakes were pulled out and the campsite was taken down.

The first pair to carry the sick would be Alec and Rurii. The pairs would change each hour, with Dennis and Walt taking fewer shifts to ensure they didn't exhaust themselves.

"All right, let's get going," said Alec. "We'll make an exit from up here and head straight down. I apologize, but we'll have to leave the mage behind."

Frol opened his eyes for a moment and nodded.

"It's fine," he said. "It is only his body that remains. His soul is already on its way home."

Sergey had been a friend and playmate of the two cousins when they were young. Though his body could not be returned to the earth, his soul would return to the place it had once known. He had been an unpleasant man, to be sure, but even then there would be people who mourned his passing—thanks to bonds that were not bound by logic. Relationships between people were at times complicated and sad—but they could also be warm.

"Shiori, you'll make our exit. We only need an opening big enough for one person to leave at a time. I know it'll be tiring, so take your time and make sure you're keeping your magic levels up. We've got more than enough recovery potions between us. Use as many as you need, okay?"

"Got it."

Shiori chose a window and cast her earth magic, opening a way out of the tower. Then she looked outside, towards the ground. By pushing the earth up from the ground, she could make an elevator of sorts for everyone to get to the bottom of the tower.

"This will be taxing on my magic levels, so let's descend in two groups," she said.

"Whatever is easiest for you, Shiori," Alec replied.

"Earthen Rise!"

The stone floor at the base of the tower began to rise. Because Shiori was fighting against gravity, she had to cast the spell twice to bring the floor up to the level of the opening she had created. Then Clemens, Nadia, and the nobles stepped on the platform—which was a two-meter square—while Shiori drank a magical energy recovery potion. When the five of them were on the makeshift elevator, Shiori cast her earth magic again and slowly lowered the platform towards the ground.

"Live and take responsibility for what you have done,' huh? Strong words," muttered Alec as he watched them go. "Dennis stayed by his lord's side and he fought, didn't he?"

Shiori looked up at Alec. She felt something like self-reproach in his tone of voice. He was looking down as his five companions got off the stone platform, but his eyes wavered with something fleeting, as though he were looking far off into the distance.

“Alec?”

Shiori reached out to take Alec’s hand, and he grasped hers gently.

“Right about the time I first reached adulthood, I threw everything away, and I ran,” he said, speaking of the past she had heard so little about. “I pushed everything onto my little brother, and I ran. I thought it was for the best at the time, but these days I wonder—if I’d stayed and fought, could things have been different? My brother was happy to see me off, but...I know he would have been worried and uncertain. Lonely, even.”

Alec chuckled wryly at himself, then went on.

“There was one more person I hurt, back then. What I did was dishonest—traitorous, even—and it brought great anger and harsh, unforgiving words upon me. I carry them with me to this day, and hear them even in my dreams.”

At the base of the tower, Clemens gave them the signal they were waiting for. Shiori used her magic to raise the platform back up to the fourth floor.

“Unforgiving words?” she asked.

A memory flashed across her mind—Alec, sick in bed, murmuring in his sleep as he struggled in the throes of a nightmare.

Alec lent Frol a shoulder and the two hopped onto the stone platform. The fringe of his hair hid Alec’s eyes, so Shiori could not make out his expression clearly from his lips alone, but there was something like a slight smile on his face that froze Shiori where she stood. It was sad and full of suffering, and Alec’s lips trembled at their edges.

“I was told that the memories we shared were worthless. That I...was worthless.”

Shiori did not know what sort of relationship Alec shared with the person who had spoken those words, or what they were thinking when they’d spoken them. Nonetheless, though they were spoken in a moment of rage, she knew they were filled with poison, and aimed to hurt.

They had come from someone whom Alec had spent enough time with to share memories—someone who had been enraged by his act of betrayal. And for a brief moment, Shiori felt as if she saw a woman’s face beyond Alec’s own, and she turned away from it.

When Shiori saw that Rurii had carried Julia onto the platform, she focused on the stones at her feet and lowered their makeshift

elevator to the ground.

“It was painful for you...?” she asked.

“It was. I trusted her as much as my brother, and I relied on her. Even now, I don’t know if those words were an outburst of anger, or if they were her true feelings...but I often wonder if this is my punishment for fleeing when I did.”

His very existence was negated by a person he trusted. A person he relied on.

But to say that the memories they shared together were worth nothing, that’s...

It makes it sound as if that person expected something more from being with him.

To be told you were unnecessary and unwanted... Shiori had been told the same thing herself—she understood the pain and suffering that Alec felt.

But she didn’t live for anyone else. She didn’t live to satisfy someone else’s desires. She did her best to get by because she wanted to live. Not for someone else, but for herself. This was what gave her life meaning, and if doing so helped others, it made Shiori happy.

“No matter what the reason was, I don’t believe you should ever tell a person that their life is meaningless or worthless. You do not exist for the sake of others. It’s not about whether or not you have ‘worth.’ You are who you are, Alec, and that’s why I lo—”

Shiori’s heart was moving faster than her mind, and her feelings were just about to leave her lips when her eyes met Frol’s, and she realized that Julia too was staring up at her with surprise in her eyes.

“That’s why you...?” prompted Alec.

“Er...um...it’s nothing,” she said.

Alec’s face grew a little disheartened.

“For a moment there I thought I was going to hear something truly wondrous...” he muttered.

“I *said* it was nothing!”

Frol and Julia let out gentle chuckles.

“Looks like it isn’t just the fevers making us hot under the collar,” said Frol.

“There is a certain heat in the air, isn’t there?” added Julia.

Shiori glared at the two Imperials—giggling even as they struggled with their fevers.

“Well, don’t you two look healthy!” she said. “If you’re well enough to tease someone, perhaps you’re well enough to walk home by yourselves!”

“Sorry, sorry,” said Frol, still being held up by Alec. “Please, take us with you. I’ve decided to live. I was raised and educated thanks to a tax that the Empire’s citizens gave their lives to pay. I am the person I

am now thanks to their blood, sweat, and tears. Though this life is mine, it is also theirs. I cannot allow it to be put to waste here.”

The snowy winds from below breezed through Frol’s blanket and ruffled his sandy-colored hair. Shiori wrapped the blanket around him once more and he nodded his thanks while staring out at the snowy landscape before them.

“Storydia is a splendid nation. The environment is not so different from Dolgast, but the lands are rich. They have been reformed and cultivated over many long years such that the soil is plentiful and welcoming of crops. I am certain that your king...or whoever leads this country, must be an exceptional human being.”

The Empire had weakened and declined because its emperor and those in charge were fools. They had turned away from the cries of their people and the crops that were in disrepair, and instead of fixing that which they had, they had instead looked to replace it with the land of neighboring nations. Compulsory conscription followed, which meant the farming communities lost man power, and when taxes could not be met, it had only hastened the Empire’s decline.

“Many territorial lords now realize that things can’t go on this way, and they are trying to improve conditions, but it is too little, too late. The state of things cannot be fixed by the efforts of a single lord. Still, their petitions are ignored by the general government. So, these families put together groups of capable individuals, to search old relics for treasures to keep themselves afloat...”

However, only a lucky handful, if that, ever made it back with such treasures in hand. The vast majority came up empty-handed, their relics long since plundered, and without the money to return home, they were left to watch as a rebellion erupted.

“The royalty and nobles of this country are just and stable. Those governing the country understand their positions and the responsibility they bear. I came to understand this as I visited its lands. The people here do not exist for the sake of the nobility. Rather, the nobility exist for the sake of the people. Our lives were made by the people. Why...why did I not see this sooner? Even Sergey must have seen it and understood the reality of it, but he could not rid himself of his pride. It was not just the people, but his own life he neglected...”

“Let it go,” said Alec, quietly. “You will only wear yourself out if you get too agitated. Yes, the Empire as you know it may be at its end. But you still live. You live with your discoveries and realizations. When you are well, you can go to a refugee camp. You can be among the people and decide how to live the rest of your life.”

The path ahead would not be an easy one. And yet...

“Yes, that is what I will do. Though I do not know if we, who once

lived as nobles, will be accepted.”

“That is up to you. I have heard that there are other nobles among the refugee camps—those that led their people out of the Empire. If you can learn to live among the people as they have, then perhaps...there is still hope.”

“Thank you.”

The makeshift elevator settled at the tower’s base. Alec chanted his muscle-boosting spell, then Clemens helped to settle Frol on his back.

“Well then, let’s be off,” said Alec.

Everyone nodded, and Rurii wobbled—though it kept things more subdued than usual so as not to jostle Julia.

2

In just two days, the roads that Nadia had previously cleared with her fire magic were once again piled high with snow, and the tracks they’d left had all but vanished.

“So much snow in just two days. But that’s northern Europe, for you, I suppose,” muttered Shiori.

“Northern...Europe?” asked Alec.

“Oh...um. That’s what people in my country called the lands to the northeast.”

Alec was intrigued by this.

“Oh? Northern Europe, huh?” he said, getting a feel for the words as he spoke them.

The winters were long here, and snow fell for half of the year. Even in the summer, warm clothes were a necessity for surviving the cool nights. Depending on the season, daily sunlight could range from six to nineteen hours. On maps, this land was placed as far north as possible. Shiori wasn’t sure if it was okay to compare it to the maps in her home world, but she had always felt that this place was located around the same area that northern Europe occupied.

Nadia cast her fire magic to make a path forward, and took the lead as the rest of the party followed. Behind her was Alec, Rurii, and Shiori, and behind them were the three nobles. Clemens was at the end of the line.

Because Alec had his hands full carrying Frol, Shiori had spread her search magic out wide so they could quickly detect any approaching magical beasts. Experienced adventurers could sense humans at a radius of up to around twenty or thirty meters, so Shiori spread her magic out to around eighty.

“Don’t push yourself too hard,” urged Alec.

“Don’t worry. I’ll take breaks to make sure I don’t drain my

magical energy too quickly.”

At this rate, she would be more than okay so long as she drank a recovery potion each time the party took a break.

“But I don’t want you to push yourself too hard either,” said Shiori. “Are you doing okay?”

Alec was carrying Frol with the help of muscle-boosting magic. The spell was convenient for how it pushed a person’s muscular strength to its limits, but it also came with serious side effects—overuse of it could result in muscle pain and exhaustion. Sometimes it left adventurers bedridden for days.

“I’m doing the same as you,” Alec replied. “Keeping the load at just the right level to not wear myself out. All the same, I’m going to be taking it easy for a while when we get back home. I hope you’ll do the same.”

The words were more of an order than a request.

“I sure will,” said Shiori with a wry grin.

The party trudged through the snowy landscape in silence for a time. The only sounds that reached their ears was the trudging of their feet through the snow. Even the few words that were spoken between them seemed to be swallowed up by the cold. The lands around them were enveloped in quiet.

The weather now was worse than it had been when they’d come the other way, and it sapped quickly at their stamina. Alec occasionally ate a ration, and Shiori regularly fed Rurii warm water—she also munched on some salted nuts.

Fortunately, they didn’t encounter any magical beasts, and reached the observation deck in about an hour. Shiori quickly made simple benches from the snow for Frol and Julia to rest on while the party took its first break. She then went about boiling some water and making ginger tea, which she passed around. Frol and Julia got cups of warm water with berry syrup mixed into them.

“How are they?” Alec asked.

“Hm... Julia is doing okay so far, but Frol looks like he’s having a hard time.”

Shiori frowned as she and Alec helped Frol to drink his water. He’d been able to speak without too much trouble earlier, but his breathing had since become shallow, and his eyelids looked very heavy.

“We’re carrying them upright,” said Alec, “so unfortunately it’s not easy on him.”

He rubbed his own shoulders and moaned.

“Shall we extend our break time slightly?”

“Good call. Let’s take an extra five minutes. We’ll keep an eye on their condition and take more breaks if we need to.”

“I’m sorry to cause you such trouble,” murmured Frol, opening his eyes lazily. He was biting his lip—less from his poor condition, and more for how much it vexed him.

“Don’t you worry,” replied Alec. “You just make sure you tell me if you start feeling unwell, okay? I can’t have you vomiting all over my back.”

Frol’s mood lightened at the joke, and he laughed.

“That would indeed be quite the disaster,” he said.

“So don’t hold back. I know speaking wears you out.”

Frol nodded and closed his eyes. A few minutes later, the party finished up its break and quickly got ready to head off again. Clemens and Dennis would carry the two Imperials for the next leg of their trip—Clemens with Frol, and Dennis handling the lighter Julia. Alec cast the muscle-boosting spell on the both of them and Dennis’s eyes grew wide.

“Why, this is amazing...” he said. “I feel like an entirely different man.”

“That effective, huh?”

“The woman is as light as a child. I could carry heavy luggage like this. If it didn’t come with such heavy side effects, I’d be lining up for more.”

Alec chuckled. The party trudged off for town as they continued to chat.

“That’s how everyone feels the first time. It’s something everyone has to go through when they learn this magic...”

Clemens smiled knowingly—it looked like he and Alec had another youthful memory wrapped up in this very spell.

“We were told that because the side effects are so harsh, you only use muscle-boosting when it’s especially necessary,” explained Alec. “But as rookies, we didn’t know how much was too much either—I made a guess, and it turned out to be way above the usual limits...”

Alec paused then, his eyebrows drooping as embarrassment filled his face. Clemens grinned.

“So Alec’s strength was sapped in an instant,” explained Clemens. “He collapsed and was out for a whole day. We couldn’t wake him. We were in the middle of an expedition, and half of our attack power was gone, just like that. It’s a good joke now, but I was in an utter panic at the time.”

“I, uh... I’m still sorry about that,” said Alec with a bashful grin.

Muscle-boosting magic only increased muscular strength. It didn’t actually raise one’s stamina, so pushing oneself too hard would still lead very quickly to exhaustion. Shiori watched as Alec avoided making eye contact with the rest of the party. It was so adorable she had to stifle her giggles.

“I see... So magic isn’t always just a convenient solution,” said Dennis.

“That’s the whole reason that mages continue to research and study it,” said Shiori, “because it has limits.”

“That’s right,” said Nadia. “There are many who are slack about researching and developing their magic, but to reach the highest levels as a spellcaster, one must understand their magic through constant trial and error each and every day.”

She turned to Shiori and winked. It was Nadia who had offered to be Shiori’s magic teacher when she’d made up her mind to become an adventurer, and it was Nadia who’d watched over her until she’d developed her skills enough to stand on her own. Nadia knew, firsthand, just how hard Shiori had worked.

Shiori responded with a quiet smile. Her decision to move on and to move forward had come from realizing that it was a disservice to both the people who acknowledged who she was, as well as to herself.

Right then, however, Shiori felt something at the edge of her search magic net, and turned to look in the direction it was coming from. She concentrated her magic once more to be sure, but there was no doubt—something was there. It was large, and after having stayed at the edges of her search magic net for a time, it slowly began to move. The zigzag pattern of its approach was likely due to it maneuvering around trees and other natural obstacles. And based on its direction, it was headed for...

“Alec,” Shiori said. “Something’s coming for us, and it’s big.”

“A snow bear?”

“I can’t tell, but it’s zigzagging slowly this way.”

“And you’re sure?”

“Yes. It’s sixty meters out.”

Alec glanced in the direction Shiori was looking, then nodded.

“Everyone stop,” he ordered. “We have a magical beast incoming. Potentially large. It’s heading this way.”

Tension ran through the party.

“Another snow bear?” asked Walt.

He moved in front of the scared Annelie for protection. Dennis, still carrying Julia, also looked concerned.

“We don’t know,” replied Alec. “But we’re going to prepare for a battle either way.”

If nothing happened, they’d simply put their weapons away and continue on. However, being slow to respond to a magical beast could cost them their lives. The winter’s larger monsters were not creatures to be trifled with—they were all dangerous.

Rurii poked Clemens and Dennis, then gestured at Frol and Julia.

“Hm? What is it?” asked Dennis, looking to Shiori for assistance.

“Rurii is asking for Frol and Julia. Probably to keep them protected.”

“Ah, I see. Thank you, slime.”

The two men’s surprised expressions softened and they lowered the Imperials to the slime, which had spread itself out along the snow. Once they were on top of it, the slime stretched itself thin and wrapped itself around Frol and Julia. It was even considerate enough to make an airhole to ensure they could still breathe easily.

But no sooner had it done so than the slime turned red—its warning color.

“Here it comes!” shouted Alec. “Forty meters out and it’s picking up speed!”

Alec and Clemens had their weapons out in an instant. Together with Nadia, they kept Annelie and her aides behind them, but their eyes never left the direction from which the beast was approaching. The snow continued to fall heavily, obscuring their view and making it difficult to see what exactly was coming. But then they heard the sound of something stomping through the snow—and the creature came lumbering into view.

At first glance, they thought they might be looking at a large human in heavy armor. But as the figure came closer, its strange form became clear. It was covered in white, shaggy hair. In its long, muscular arms, it carried an animal of some kind—most likely prey. From between strands of the long hair that hid the beast’s face, they could just make out two strange, round, and black eyes, devoid of emotion.

“What is that?” muttered Alec.

It was not a snow bear. This magical beast walked on two legs. Shiori wondered—was this creature even in her bestiary? She tried to recall the contents of it as best she could, but she had never seen anything like this.

However, her fellow adventurers reacted differently—after staring at the beast for a time, Alec’s expression stiffened.

“No way...” he said in a low voice. “A Yeti?”

The white magical beast stood some three meters tall, pushing through the snow with its long, muscular arms. When it saw them, it froze in place, observing them with its black eyes.

“A Yeti... That’s a mythical beast, no? A creature that exists only in legend,” said Annelie, the wavering in her voice clear to all.

Nadia, by her side, was pale.

“Mythical beast” was the term given to magical beasts that had only been told of in rumors and eyewitness accounts, but had yet to be officially identified. In Japan, these were called UMAs, short for “unidentified mysterious animals.” Outside of Japan, these creatures

were usually called “cryptids.” In Storydia, this category included unicorns, Fenrirs, and sea serpents. There were rumors, in fact, that it was a sea serpent which, twenty-five years ago, capsized a huge passenger ship, killing all on board, including the nation’s prince. However, this was mostly seen as thoughtless and ill-natured gossip—investigations showed no evidence of such an attack, and deemed the ship’s disaster the result of an unforeseen and sudden storm. Nonetheless, this was how many rumors of mythical beasts spread throughout the lands.

“I want to think I’m imagining things, but... Clemens, what do you make of it?” asked Alec.

Clemens shook his head.

“Well, if the rumors are to be believed... And based on the shape of that thing...”

Alec groaned.

“You’re telling me it actually exists?”

What faced them now was a humanlike magical beast, pure white in color and not unlike a giant ape. It watched them very, very carefully, while remaining unnervingly quiet. Its expressionless face seemed at once both humanlike and bestial. It lacked any of the emotion one would expect to detect in a snow wolf or snow bear—beasts which reacted with anger or the urge to kill. Instead, its pitch-black eyes were empty, like black marbles.

Shiori shivered with a fear she had never before experienced. Perhaps it was simply a deep-seated feeling of aversion. She felt a terrible unease and discomfort at the sight of this bipedal monster, which was almost human in appearance.

“I must admit, I am...very creeped out right now,” said Dennis, raspingly.

Annelie and Walt, both shivering, nodded in agreement. It seemed they felt the same as Shiori.

“It isn’t attacking us...so perhaps it is a docile beast?” said Shiori.

There was literally next to no detailed information regarding the Yeti. All that had been recorded were descriptions of its appearance. Its fighting capabilities were unknown. Still, it had such an overwhelming presence and exuded such pressure that they all knew for certain it was by no means weak. If at all possible, they wanted to avoid combat.

“I sure hope so,” said Alec. “I hope it’s happy just to let us continue on our way.”

Still, his words lacked conviction. They all had a feeling that things would not be so simple.

The anthropoid had a mouth that jutted outwards, and the corners of it curled into a twisted arc, like the creature was smiling. The hair

on the back of Shiori's neck stood on end.

The beast shook slowly, and then, in a sudden movement, it threw what it was holding right at them with tremendous force.

"Move!"

Alec dove towards Shiori and Nadia, while Clemens covered the nobles. The object slammed into the ground between them, and it was revealed to be snow-covered livestock, its legs chewed clean off. Annelie, staring at it as she sat on her rear, let out a bloodcurdling scream. Dennis quickly took her in his arms to block her view of it, while Walt stared at the corpse in disbelief, his face deathly pale.

"So the thing that's been attacking the local livestock...is this?!" asked Alec.

A memory flashed through Shiori's mind of the knight who had told them that a creature had been attacking local farm animals.

"Here it comes!"

Clemens shouted his warning the moment the Yeti moved.

"Damn! It's quick!"

The beast covered the distance even quicker than they could have imagined given its size, and it raised its arms up high, slamming them down towards Alec and Clemens. The two men leapt out of the way and the Yeti's fists crashed down onto the path, creating a hole in the ground as snow went flying into the air. Then the Yeti seemed to vanish in the white that surrounded them.

"It's circling us! Be ready!"

Tense voices flew through the air.

"Behind you!"

The wintry mythical beast seemed entirely unaffected by the snow, moving with ferocious speed and appearing behind Shiori. At the same time, however, a huge fireball hit the beast directly in the face. It was Nadia's most powerful fire magic.

While the Yeti wrangled with the flames around its head, Clemens circled around behind it. He leapt high into the air thanks to the effects of Alec's muscle-boosting magic, thrusting his dual blades into the beast's body.

The air shook as the Yeti roared. It twisted and writhed to shake Clemens off, but Clemens had already pulled his swords free and leapt to safety. He glanced at his weapons with a look of frustration.

"Damn this thing!" he spat. "My blades are covered in grease! I couldn't reach its vital organs—there's a thick layer of fat protecting it!"

As Clemens readied himself for another attack, the Yeti slowly turned towards Shiori. The flames around it had extinguished, and only the tips of its hair had been burned. The rest of it appeared largely unharmed. The thick hairs covering its body were like steel

needles—the creature would not burn easily.

“Tch! You annoying fiend!” cursed Nadia as she concentrated magic into her fingertips. “This way! Hurry!”

While Nadia drew the Yeti’s attention, Shiori moved Annelie, Dennis, and Walt away. Clearly scared, the movements of the nobles were stilted and awkward, and they half-crawled, half-ran as they tried to escape. Rurii followed after them, but its movements were slowed by the humans it carried.

“Let me assure you—whichever parts of you can burn are going to!” cried Nadia, unleashing another fireball from her fingertips.

The sound of flames filled the air along with the fierce stench of steam. The Yeti drew back with a roar that shook everyone’s eardrums. But there wasn’t even time for them to accept the fear—on the battlefield, you had to keep moving or risk death.

The Yeti, wrapped in flames, scratched at its own face. Perhaps it was having trouble breathing. Shiori wondered if perhaps it would suffocate like the snow wolves she had faced in Brovito Village, but it was not so—the flames extinguished quickly, and the burned bits of the Yeti’s hair wafted on the snowy winds.

But at this very moment, Alec rushed in, his magic sword blazing red with fire. He put all of his strength into a great thrust, and the Yeti once more roared with pain. Alec ripped his sword free in the next instant, and jumped backwards as the Yeti swiped at him.

Alec clicked his tongue in frustration.

“Well?” asked Clemens.

“No good,” replied Alec. “Behind that fat is lean muscle. My blade couldn’t pierce it—it was pushed back.”

Even with their offensive options fading away, the three adventurers never lost their cool. They would work out a strategy as they fought. The Yeti turned to face them all once more and took a quick step forward.

“Freeze, Fryse!”

At Nadia’s words, countless ice pillars surrounded the Yeti’s feet, covering its body. But a moment later, they shattered like breaking glass.

“Guess I should have expected that ice magic wouldn’t be effective against a mythical beast of winter!”

But it seemed that the Yeti had very high levels of magic resistance in general.

“You can’t even slow it down?” asked Walt.

“We won’t get away that easily,” replied Nadia. “This beast won’t let us. It’s incredibly fast, even in the snow. It will gain ground on us in mere seconds, and...”

Nadia let out a scream. It was quickly followed by pained grunts

from Alec and Clemens. They felt a wavering in the air, followed by a blast of freezing cold wind. Their cheeks were sliced open by the icy snow, bursting with small clouds of blood. Alec and Nadia shot flames into the Yeti's face, bringing the wind to a stop.



“Freezing breath too?! This is bad.”

Alec wiped the blood from his cheek with a hand. Among high-level beasts, some had the ability to breathe fire and ice. It seemed this mythical beast was among that number.

“We can’t allow a creature so dangerous to simply run wild,” said Nadia. “If it somehow makes its way into town, we’re looking at a massacre.”

Were the Yeti living somewhere in the depths of the forest, they could just leave it be. But not here, so close to towns and farms—it was too dangerous and unpredictable to be left to run loose. The area outside of the town’s outer walls was dotted with farms too. It was their duty as adventurers to find some way to bring this creature down, if such a thing was possible.

The Yeti’s mouth once more twisted, as though it were laughing derisively at the fragile, powerless humans before it. It was at that moment that Shiori felt multiple creatures closing in on them. It was a magical energy she had felt before, and she turned to what was heading straight for them.

“This is the last thing we need!” she cried.

In terms of encounter rates, it shouldn’t have come as a surprise, but Shiori couldn’t help complaining all the same. She focused on her hands to ready a spell as she kept her teammates up to date.

“Snow jellyfish, incoming! I’m sorry, Alec, but I’m going to have to push myself!”

“We don’t have any other choice. Just be careful! Leave this brute to us! You and Nadia focus on protecting everyone from the jellyfish!”

“Got it!” said Shiori.

“Understood!” added Nadia.

The Yeti raised its fists to attack the two vanguards just as a pack of snow jellyfish wafted out from between the trees. It was a smaller pack than what they’d faced on the way to the tower, but still quite numerous.

As the pack of snow jellyfish surrounded the group, Shiori cast air-conditioning magic—this time in a large-enough radius to cover the entire area in which they fought. She had seen for herself how weak the jellyfish were to even moderate heat—what was comfortable to humans would shrivel up and kill a snow jellyfish.

And so the pack of jellyfish began to fall, the moisture in them slowly evaporating as they dried up. But as the jellyfish fell at their feet, Shiori could feel just as much magic being sapped from her body. Casting a large area-of-effect spell drained her quickly, and Shiori fished a potion out of her pouch and drank it while she continued to cast her spell.

Snow jellyfish rained down from above, some of them charred and black from the whirlwind of fire that Nadia had cast. Together with Shiori's air-conditioning magic, the temperature of the air around them began to rise.

"Huh...?" said Clemens.

"What's going on?" said Alec.

The two vanguards were dodging the Yeti's attacks and countering with their own, and were focusing on the monster's arms, which appeared more susceptible to blade attacks than its body.

They were surprised because the Yeti's movements had grown dull. Neither were about to let the opportunity slip from their grasp, and they moved in together, launching fierce strikes at the Yeti's right arm. A roar pierced the air. Blood splashed across the snow. The monster's right arm dangled from its body from a single strip of skin.

"All that work, and finally we get an arm."

"It's practically made of stone."

"But wait..."

The Yeti swung its right shoulder in annoyance, tearing off its own arm and throwing it away. The two vanguards cringed at the sight, continuing to watch the beast with extreme caution. The monster's movements really *had* dulled. It had accumulated damage over the course of battle, and now it had lost its right arm, but Alec felt something else was at play too...

"Even if it's resistant to magic, the Yeti seems weak to high temperatures," he said.

"You might be right. All of the eyewitness accounts of the beast have been in winter," said Clemens.

Perhaps the mythical beast was like other winter beasts, which could not function in the warmer seasons. That would explain the Yeti's other nickname: the "Abominable Snowman."

"Shall I keep up the fireball attacks, then?" suggested Nadia.

"I've got a better idea..." said Alec after a moment of thought. He glanced at Shiori and grinned. "How about we give it a nice hot bath?"

"Aha," replied Nadia with a broad smile. "You've got some Shiori in you, haven't you?"

"I've got her...in me...?"

The way she had worded that made Alec feel embarrassed, but Nadia simply smiled.

"You've learned from her that sometimes you don't need to take a monster down with magic directly—you can use that magic for a whole host of other effects."

While Alec and Nadia spoke, the Yeti shifted its body, perhaps readying itself for another attack. It wavered slightly as it walked—

though whether that was because of the heat or the loss of blood, they did not know.

"Then let me handle the jellyfish," said Nadia. "Shiori, they'll need you with the Yeti!"

"Okay!"

As Shiori's air-conditioning magic dissipated, Nadia unleashed another whirlwind of fire. Rurii stretched its body to shield Annelie's head from falling jellyfish, still carrying the two sick Imperials. The slime was nothing if not dexterous.

"Shiori! Now!" shouted Alec.

"Pitfall!"

At Alec's signal, Shiori opened a huge hole in the ground, and the mythical beast stepped right into it. They heard a dull thud as it landed at the bottom of the hole, then a roar bellowed out of it.

They ran to the hole, where the mythical beast had gotten back to its feet with a low growl. It raised its head and glared up at the humans looking down at it. Its black eyes focused on Shiori, and the pure madness in them had her taking an instinctive step backwards. Alec put a hand around her shoulder to encourage her.

"We hit it with everything we've got, but it barely seemed to feel anything. Even falling from that height to the bottom of this hole, it doesn't seem to be particularly hurt."

"Perhaps that thick layer of fat under its skin acts as a kind of cushioning."

The hole was some ten meters deep, and judging by the sound alone, the Yeti had hit the bottom with considerable force. The beast lumbered towards the wall of the hole and placed its remaining hand against it. It deftly positioned its fingers to find a handhold and began to push with some force.

"Don't tell me it's going to climb out with a single arm?!"

It seemed it was certainly going to try. They watched as the Yeti used its lone arm and its two legs to grip the wall. Shiori flinched at the sight—the beast had incredible grip strength, and she couldn't help imagining what might happen if it caught her in its grasp.

"Water Current!"

Shiori hurriedly cast her spell, feeling it was fortunate that she could draw upon the huge amounts of snow around her, which had a close affinity with water magic. She absorbed the moisture from the snow to create a torrent of water, then sent this rushing like a waterfall into the hole. Water sprayed up as it did so, and in the next instant, Shiori used her fire magic to raise its temperature. Steam rose into the air, and the temperature of the water reached that of a particularly hot bath.

"I know you wanted to boil it," said Shiori, "but..."

She let the heat taper off as she watched, sensitive to the magical energy emanating from the Yeti. From the edge of the hole she could see the mythical beast floating in the man-made hot spring.

“Doesn’t look like we need to go as far as boiling it,” said Alec, peeking into the hole along with her.

For a mythical beast that lived in temperatures below zero, a forty-degree bath was fatal. Its body was designed specifically to keep in heat to protect from the winter cold, and in the bath that internal heat simply continued to rise until it suffered something not unlike heat stroke.

The Yeti floated facedown in the water. Eventually, the magical energy in its body disappeared completely, leaving only a corpse in a makeshift bath.

“Quite the handful, but...once you know how to deal with it the beast goes down quick,” said Clemens.

From the looks of things, Nadia had finished taking care of the last of the jellyfish. Rurii had also returned to its natural color—a peaceful lapis-blue.

“Great work,” said Nadia. “I was worried for a moment, but I’m glad it didn’t get out of hand.”

“You did great yourself, big sister.”

At Alec’s direction, Shiori drained the water from the hole and raised the earth back to its natural level.

“We did it,” he said. “Now please, drink this.”

Shiori took the magical energy recovery potion from him with thanks and made sure that everyone in the party was okay. Then she went about seeing to the party’s first aid needs. Amazingly, Alec and Clemens had gotten through the entire battle—with a potential mythical beast, no less—with little more than cuts on their cheeks.

When the first aid was done, Clemens and Alec went about examining the beast. Though the monster’s hair was wet and had begun to freeze slowly, with its blank eyes still open it looked very much as if it still had life left in it. Annelie crept closer to it, with Dennis and Walt still huddled to her as if to keep her safe.

“Such an amazing sight,” she uttered. “Is it really a mythical beast?”

“We’ll have to leave that to the experts to decide—for all we know, it could be some kind of variant.”

“A new species, perhaps?”

Alec nodded.

“In any case, we have to notify the knights so they can investigate more thoroughly. There’s a chance it could be breeding somewhere nearby. It would be dangerous to have something like this making a home so close to town. Annelie, do you mind if we take a little time

here?"

"No, not at all."

They didn't want to take too much time, given that they still had to consider the sick, but they needed to gather some parts of the beast for inspection and do what they could to preserve its corpse. It would be impossible for them to carry the entire corpse as it was, so they decided instead to take the right arm that they'd lopped off—they bent the huge arm at the elbow joint, bound it with rope, and somehow stuffed it into a preservation bag so it could be carried on top of a rucksack.

The rest of the corpse was caged in Nadia's ice magic, then covered in Shiori's earth magic, so as to ensure that other beasts wouldn't scavenge the corpse. They also erected a pillar of ice by the corpse's side to make the Yeti easy to find.

All the while, Annelie worked diligently at her sketchbook, likely because she wanted to record an image of such a rare beast.

"Do you think this is edible?" asked Walt. "They say the ugliest animals have the finest taste."

"That you're even asking that makes me doubt your sanity," said Dennis.

Everyone burst into laughter at Walt's and Dennis's comments. The tension among the party finally eased. Fortunately, when they checked on Frol and Julia, their conditions had not worsened during the fight, but all the same, it was important to keep moving.

"I know we all want to take a break," said Alec, "but let's keep the momentum going and head on to the next break point."

Nobody really wanted to spend too long with the Yeti corpse anyway. It wasn't that they expected anything to happen, but it was a mythical beast—the mere thought of the corpse moving again left them with a lingering fear.

The party set off again, glancing back as they went.

The party stopped for a few breaks as they continued, and on their longer break Shiori once again created a bench from the snow and some warm food to keep their strength levels up. It was a grueling day, but morale was high—everyone was motivated by the need to help the sick, and buoyed by the thought that if they pushed on a little harder, they could rest in the safety of the town's warm beds by the end of the day.

The party encountered a few magical beasts too, but only low-level monsters like snow jellyfish, horned hares, and ice lizards—nothing that gave them any trouble.

"I have to admit," said Shiori, "I'm so glad you didn't leave on your own."

Alec, now carrying Julia, nodded.

“It gives me shivers to think of what might have happened if I’d encountered a creature like that on my own.”

Alec had taken solo suppression quests before, but even he lacked confidence when it came to an unknown monster in the midst of the snow.

“The reason there might have only been eyewitness reports until now is because those that attempted to fight, lost,” he said.

“Quite possibly...” said Shiori.

She thought of the somewhat jeering smile of the Yeti. She’d felt something like intelligence from it. Perhaps those that had encountered it and lived to tell the tale had survived only because of the creature’s whims.

The party walked on through the falling snow, sometimes chatting as they went, while around them the environment began to darken. Just as the sun began to fall and the snowy landscape took on a shade of blue, they saw the glimmer of lights in the distance.

“It’s town...” uttered someone at the head of the party.

An air of relief washed over all of them. Everyone shared words of congratulations, and Alec and Shiori smiled as their eyes met. Rurii, carrying Frol, trembled at her feet.

Even through the falling snow, the magic lanterns lining the outer wall of the town of Silveria were clearly visible. In front of the party was a small flickering light that grew larger as it approached, eventually revealing a middle-aged man in a blue coat carrying a magic lantern. He lifted his lantern to get a better look at them, then spoke.

“Aha! So it is you.” It was the knight they’d met at the watchpost on the day of their departure, and his smile brought wrinkles to the corners of his eyes. “When I saw the lights I had a feeling it might be you... Glad to see you got back safe.”

He really did seem truly happy to see the party again, but his expression turned to one of surprise when he noticed Julia on Alec’s back.

“Who is that...?” he asked.

“One of the trio of adventurers you told us about,” replied Alec. “We have one more in our care, but both are ill.”

“We’ll have to get them to the garrison. Let’s wait at the watchpost for the time being.”

The knight saw them all inside. The building was more spacious than it had first appeared—even with everyone inside, it didn’t feel cramped or stuffy. Judging by the simple infirmary at the far end of the place, it seemed likely it was used to accommodate the sick during busier seasons. Though there was usually a doctor on hand, none were

stationed there during the winter, so Frol and Julia were simply laid down to rest in the infirmary. Their temperatures were still high and their breathing remained ragged, so they were given water and wet towels for their foreheads.

The knight, Mikal, sent his partner out to call for a first aid carriage. He then ushered the party into a waiting room, made some tea, and passed it around.

“And what of the third adventurer?” asked Mikal, taking out what looked like a report book.

It appeared likely that Mikal had already guessed what had happened to Sergey, Frol and Julia’s companion, but he seemed to want to be sure. Alec, who had discovered the body, answered.

“Unfortunately, we had to leave his corpse at the tower.”

“Do you know how he died?”

“I believe it was blunt force trauma to the head. There were wounds on the back of it. He’d forced open the door to a room that was filled with water, and it seems he struck his head in the flooding that ensued.”

“Wait a sec. Water? Flooding?”

“On the third floor, a part of the outer wall has crumbled away. Rainwater and snow got into the room from there, and because the tower is tilted, it practically filled the room.”

“I see,” said Mikal with a thoughtful frown. “So the tower is deteriorating... Well, it has been some time since it was abandoned. It may be best to make it off-limits to travelers. For adventurers, though, you’ll just enter at your own risk.”

Mikal chuckled and scribbled the details into his notebook. He nodded as he learned that the adventurers were Imperials, and heard their motivations—it all made an odd kind of sense to the knight.

“Ah, so that explains it,” he muttered.

As for what would happen next, there was the damage to the observation deck to consider, and Frol and Julia would have to be questioned upon their recovery. Their punishment would likely be decided then. Mikal was of the opinion that the now deceased Sergey had been the trio’s main instigator, and seemed to think that Frol and Julia would get off with a relatively light punishment for their part in the crimes.

“There’s, uh...one more important thing we have to report,” said Alec, looking at Clemens.

“We encountered a magical beast none of us has ever seen,” said Clemens, standing to his feet. “We brought its arm to show you, but we hope you’ll be able to do a more thorough investigation.”

“What kind of beast are we talking about?”

Alec hesitated before speaking. Clearly, he was thinking about

how best to explain it. The party looked at one another, and then Clemens turned his eyes upon the preservation bag lying on the floor.

“We think it might have been a Yeti,” said Alec. “It was carrying dead livestock when we found it, so we believe it’s likely the creature was responsible for the attacks on farms you told us about.”

Mikal’s gentle expression turned suddenly stern, almost as if he were about to scold them all for making such a bad joke. But when he saw the serious faces staring back at him, he faltered.

“I know it sounds preposterous,” said Clemens. “In any case, please take a look for yourself.”

Clemens took the Yeti’s arm out of the bag and placed it on top. It was strong and muscular, and covered in white hair.

“I...” Mikal began to speak, but trailed off, finding no words to express his shock. He reached out and began to examine the arm. “I’ve never seen any magical beast with arms like this. It’s not a troll either—there’s far too much hair, not to mention the four fingers. And this hair... It’s like it’s made from metal skewers.”

“I have a full-body sketch of the creature, though admittedly it was rushed. Please feel free to take it if you need it,” said Annelie, passing over the page from her sketchbook.

Mikal let out a gasp of surprise at the image on the paper.

“This is all so difficult to believe... You’re certain this is what you saw?”

“I assure you, on the Lovner family name, it is what we saw. The adventurers here preserved the corpse and left a marker to help you find it. You’ll be able to see it for yourself.”

At the mention of the Lovner name, Mikal quickly realized who Annelie was.

“Well, if the margravine herself states as much, then who am I to deny it?” he said with a sigh. He looked from the sketch in his hand to the arm resting on the floor. “I’ll have to make a report to the higher-ups and have that corpse collected as soon as possible.”

“Please. It was very dangerous, so the sooner we establish best practices for handling such beasts, the better.”

Mikal nodded.

“Understood.”

The party then answered Mikal’s more detailed questions about the mythical beast—telling him of its agility and speed in the snow, its power, the fat under its skin and its firm muscles, and the freezing breath it was capable of attacking with. Mikal’s expression was one of utter shock, but he couldn’t help responding with a wry chuckle when he heard of how it was finally slain.

Just as their conversation was finishing up, they heard the neighing of horses from outside the watchpost—the first aid carriage

had arrived.

“Once the investigation is complete, I expect that the findings will be sent to the Guild. Until such time, please don’t speak of the beast to anyone else. We don’t want people getting unnecessarily worried, and we don’t want any rash folks and their friends rushing over here looking for Yetis.”

The party all nodded—none took issue with Mikal’s request.

Mikal spoke with his partner, who had returned with the first aid carriage, and his once stern expression eased back into his usual smile.

“Fortunately, the carriage is quite large. All of you should be able to ride into town.”

“Many thanks. To be honest, walking any farther than we already have might well prove impossible,” said Alec.

“Thank you ever so much,” added Annelie.

Perhaps because they’d now completed their objective of delivering the sick to the knights, Walt had practically collapsed in his chair with a pained grin. Dennis, too, was utterly exhausted, resting his elbows on the table and holding his head as he stared into the distance. Alec and Clemens seemed fine compared to the two nobles, but even then, their faces showed how weary they were. Poor Rurii, too, was unable to keep its usual round shape and looked not unlike a deflated dumpling.

“You did great, Rurii,” said Shiori. “When we get home let’s make sure to eat something nice.”

The slime wobbled with joy at Shiori’s words.

The medics who arrived with the carriage did a quick check of Frol and Julia, then carried them out to the carriage. Though there was much they likely wanted to say given the circumstances, for now they had only kind words for the two Imperials.

“You’re survivors,” they said, “and you’re okay. You’ll be fine. There’s nothing more to worry about.”

With tears in their eyes, Frol and Julia nodded. Shiori hoped they could recover somewhere quiet and warm, and return to full health.

“We may need to contact the Guild about this magical beast,” said Mikal. “I hope you don’t mind me calling on you again.”

“Not at all,” said Alec.

Mikal saw them off with a salute, and the party climbed aboard the first aid carriage.

In Storydia, first aid carriages were the equivalent of ambulances. Inside were three simple bunks, with benches on either side of them for the medics and other travelers to sit upon. At the end of the carriage were shelves lined with wooden boxes, filled with medical supplies.

Frol and Julia were placed upon the bunks, and seat belts were

strapped over their blankets to ensure they didn't fall. Shiori and the rest of the party sat on the benches, and then the carriage began to move. Perhaps due to some innovation with the wheels, they felt next to no rocking within the carriage.

"Wow... First aid carriages are such a smooth ride. It's amazing," Shiori uttered.

The medic closest to her looked pleased at the compliment.

"That they are," he said proudly. "They utilize a technology that was once reserved only for royalty. However, His Majesty had it put into use for first aid purposes as well. It makes a real difference for the patients, I can tell you. These carriages are spreading across the lands, so it might not be long before we see them available for regular citizens too."

"Oh, I see. How wonderful of him."

The knight nodded with pride, and Shiori couldn't help but notice a little of that in Alec's expression too—it must feel nice when a foreigner compliments the leader of your nation, she thought.

At long last, they arrived at their lodgings. The carriage came to a halt and the canvas flaps were peeled back. They looked up at the gentle lights of the inn illuminating the snowy scenery.

"Thank you so much for taking such good care of us," said Frol, who was still struggling with his fever, but intent on saying something nonetheless. "Thank you, and my apologies for...for everything that happened."

"Don't worry about it. You just focus on your recovery," said Alec.

"We will. Oh, and please, take these..."

Frol passed Alec something—which turned out to be a number of fire magic stones. They were the same stones that had kept Frol and Julia going when they had been slowly freezing to death.

"They may not pay for the trouble we caused you, but...please accept them with our thanks."

For a moment Alec's brow furrowed. He turned to the group with a glance, and everyone nodded—silently, and with smiles. Alec turned back to Frol and returned the stones to Frol's hand.

"No. These are yours now," he said.

"But..."

"It's fine. You will need money. That, and..." Alec began to grin as he continued. "You may well face a fine for what you did to the observation deck. If you don't have the money to cover the damages, you're looking at volunteer work to pay it off."

"Most troublesome...indeed," muttered Frol with a chuckle. "We would like to get to the refugee camp as soon as we can. We will keep these stones, then. Thank you so much, for everything."

"Don't mention it. Be well."

The two Imperials nodded their thanks, and the party bid them farewell with pats on the shoulders and gentle squeezes of the hand before leaving the carriage. The medics then gave a salute and closed the carriage flaps, leaving the party to watch as it disappeared silently into the snow. Someone in the party let out a sigh, but it was not one of regret—rather it was one of relief, mixed with a touch of loneliness.

“We...we finally made it back,” said Annelie. “It feels like it’s been so long since we were last here.”

“One could say you’ve experienced enough for a lifetime, Annie,” said Dennis.

“Truly a valuable and worthwhile journey.”

The nobles’ voices, though tired, were filled with a sense of accomplishment.

“Shiori, Alec, Clemens, Nadia—and yes, you too, Rurii. Thank you all so much,” said Annelie. “I wish I could properly express my gratitude to you all right this instant, but I hope you will allow me the grace of doing so tomorrow instead. I...I am utterly exhausted.”

“Please, do not worry in the slightest,” said Shiori. “Take as much time as you need and make sure you all get a good night’s sleep.”

Now that everything was over, the three nobles looked to be holding each other up where they stood.

“The rooms you stayed in before have all been kept for you,” said Annelie. “I will be covering the expense, so rest well.”

“Nothing if not generous,” said Alec.

“I will accept your kindness with thanks and slumber,” said Nadia.

The party smiled among themselves—though it had been a journey of only a few days, they now spoke with each other and felt like friends.

Once preparations were done at the reception desk, Annelie arranged for them to have breakfast together the following day and quickly retired to her room. She seemed content to have a simple room service dinner, but Shiori thought it was more likely she’d be asleep before it even arrived—the party could hear as much in the voices of her and Dennis, floating out from behind their door.

“At least change into your pajamas!”

“I’ve not the energy...”

The adventurers couldn’t help but laugh.

“How about us? Shall we order room service too?”

“Hm... Perhaps it would be quicker just to eat at the dining room.”

Though Shiori wanted to take a rest, she feared that if she fell asleep now she wouldn’t wake until morning. She could tell that her fellow adventurers all felt the same way, so they decided to have a quick dinner and an early night.

Shiori woke to the distant sound of a door closing. She took a look at the clock and saw that it was just past midnight. She remembered going to bed around six in the evening, and realized she must have slept through until now.

She listened to the footsteps that followed the closing of the door, and how they stopped in front of her own. But this lasted only a moment, and then they grew distant again.

Alec?

Shiori had a feeling it was him, and so she sat up quietly. Nadia was sound asleep in the bed next to hers. Rurii, too, was deep in slumber—after indulging in a veritable mountain of meat skewers, the supremely satisfied slime had returned to their room and forsaken its usual stretching routine in favor of passing out right away. Neither looked like they would wake before morning.

The two of you are true adventurers.

Shiori wrapped a shawl around her shoulders and quietly slipped out of the room. The inn was enveloped in the silence of late-night slumber.

As she walked down the corridor, Alec came into sight. He was in his usual casual shirt, sitting on the edge of a bay window. He stared out at the snowy scenery and sipped from a small bottle of wine. Perhaps it was because of the angle of the light from the surrounding magic lanterns, but there seemed to be something listless and heavy in his expression. He appeared to notice someone coming, and looked up.

“Shiori,” he said, surprised. “What’s wrong? Can’t sleep?”

“No, I just happened to wake up,” she replied. “But what about you? Something on your mind?”

“I woke in the evening and couldn’t get back to sleep. I thought maybe a little drink would help.”

He smiled somewhat awkwardly, and Shiori moved closer to him. Exhaustion was etched into his features, and there were dark marks under his eyes. She could tell that he’d barely slept at all.

Shiori reached out with a hand and touched his cheek. He put his hand upon hers and squeezed it tight. It felt like he was clinging to her, like he wanted to keep her from floating away.

“Why are you here?” he asked.

“Hm?”

“Why do you stay by my side?”

“Alec...?”

Shiori cupped his other cheek too and brought his eyes to her own.

“What’s wrong? Was it a nightmare?”

Alec hesitated for a moment, then nodded curtly.

"It's that dream," he said. "I just can't stand it."

"What dream?"

"I saw it again...the day I was told I was worthless. I dreamed of it."

Even now, he said, the events of that day haunted him. In his dreams, he saw it—the day that all of the memories that had felt so warm had been shattered, and his own existence made out to be worthless—and when he woke, he would not find sleep again.

"I know how pathetic it is... How pathetic I am, to still feel this way after twenty years."

He attempted a smile, but it was weak. The words he'd heard that day, spoken by one he trusted, were like a blade laced with poison, and it had pierced the weakest part of his heart. There it had festered and, to this day, it continued to torture him.

"You put great trust in her, didn't you?"

"As much as I put in my own brother," said Alec. "Perhaps even more. I leaned on her. She was my support."

Shiori nodded.

"I was still just a boy, but she showed me kindness. She told me it was okay to cry if things were hard, and she gave me her heart."

She waited for him to go on.

"I loved her, like a sister."

"I see..."

Shiori felt a shiver run through Alec's hand as it continued to clasp her own. He was strong, and he was kind, and he always protected her, but in this moment he appeared so incredibly fragile. And the fact that he would open this part of himself, and share this weakness with her, was something that made her love for him deepen.

With a gentle pull of her hands she brought Alec's head closer, and wrapped him in an embrace. She ran a hand through his chestnut-brown hair—a gentle gesture she repeated as a way to console him.

"I'm sorry..." he uttered. "I'm sorry to tell you of a woman from my past..."

"It's fine..."

But it *did* cause an ache in her heart. And it did cause an undeniable jealousy to run through her—the thought of this unknown woman, who had been by Alec's side for so long, holding him in her arms and passionately tasting his lips. Shiori could not deny these feelings, and yet...

"It's fine," she said again. "It was an experience so painful that it haunts you even now. How about letting it all out, here and now, with me? It might make you feel better."

Alec's pain was her pain, and she wanted to share it. She felt his

head shuffle gently in her arms.

“She...loved me too,” he said. “I had always thought that someday we would be together. But,” and Alec’s grip on Shiori tightened as he said these words, “my family is one of...minor...nobility. When my father fell ill, a question arose of who would inherit his position—me, his illegitimate son...or my younger brother, his legitimate heir. Arguments broke out around us, various factions formed, and it all got out of control—so I thought that everything would be sorted out if I simply left the family. However, in doing so I could no longer be with her. Our social standings would cease to match, and I couldn’t take her with me because she’d been raised in the nobility herself. She was already almost past prime marriageable age, and I knew that this would cause her problems. I tried to arrange a different marriage partner for her—it was the least I could do.”

Shiori waited patiently for him to find the words he was looking for.

“But she couldn’t accept it. And her reaction was only natural. I had made her wait, essentially wasting years during which she could have married someone else. She had long waited in the belief that one day I would ask her hand in marriage, only to be told that I had to leave her. Perhaps things would have been different if I had been able to talk to her about it all earlier, but I didn’t have that luxury. I’m not surprised that she was angry.”

Alec paused before going on.

“But even then...*even then*, I hoped that in the end she would understand my decision. She was as kind as a sister...as a mother, even. So I had a tiny flame of hope in my heart that perhaps she would say she wanted to come with me. But instead, she...” Alec stopped as a shiver ran through him. “She told me that I was worthless. She told me that everything we’d shared together was worthless. She told me never to speak to her again, and she left. That was the last I ever saw of her.”

“Alec...”

As a woman herself, Shiori understood the woman’s feelings. If you had felt the promise of marriage and waited past your best years only to be broken up with, you would be angry. Anyone would. She had heard herself of how Annelie, in her late twenties, had been derided for putting marriage off for so long—Shiori felt that it was perhaps even harder than she could imagine for the daughter of a good family to find another marriage partner at such an age.

But even then, she could not abide by the idea of negating a person’s entire value. Alec had reasons for making his decision, and to meet his attempts at sincerity and honesty with such words was, to her, heartless and cruel.

“I was born outside of the family line,” said Alec. “I was fortunate that my father’s family took me in and was kind to me, but my standing in society was not a good one. I was hurt and bullied for my past, and girls largely ignored me. But when it became known that I might succeed my father, those same girls changed in an instant. It made me sick.”

Among them all, however, that one girl had always been kind to Alec, right from the start. Even though he was laughed at for being illegitimate, she approached him for the person he was. And that was why he believed her kindness to be genuine.

“But the moment she knew I was leaving, her attitude changed. I couldn’t help but wonder if the kindness she’d shown me was all an act... Had she tricked me with her generosity, ever since I was a child? When I had that thought, I...”

He could not help wondering if he was a fool for opening his heart, and for all the times he gave voice to his feelings. His breath came out shaking at its edges as he spoke, melting into the silence of the air around them. There was something desperate in the way he clung to her, and so Shiori continued to run her hand gently through his hair.

“You loved her. You gave her your heart,” Shiori said.

“I did... I loved her.”

To hear him utter the word “love” directed at another woman sent an aching tremor through Shiori. Still, she knew that those feelings were in the past, now.

“Ever since then,” said Alec, “I haven’t been able to stand fake, flirtatious women. That is to say, I wouldn’t have a problem with them if they would just approach me normally...”

“I see...”

As she combed her fingers through Alec’s hair, Shiori looked out at the pure white snow covering the town out the window. Human hearts were complicated things. They could not remain pure and innocent like the snow. People had their own points of view, their own intentions, and their own expectations—and so it was that these things weaved and clashed as people lived, sometimes falling in love, and sometimes causing each other pain.

As this all flowed through her mind, one particular thought floated to the forefront, and Shiori opened her mouth to ask about it.

“Alec,” she said.

“Yes?”

“You said that when you left home, you broke up with that woman. When, and if, you return to the nobility...will you break up with me?”

Her thoughts had snagged on his words. He’d said that they’d

broken up because their social standings would no longer match. That having to live such a life would be too hard for her.

Then what about me?

At Shiori's question, Alec's breath caught in his throat.

"You're a noble, or a person of high stature, aren't you...?" she asked.

Alec hesitated for a moment, but finally nodded.

"I am."

"But I am just a commoner, and a foreigner at that. I am the very opposite."

If Alec decided to return home...would he break up with her as he did his past love? The very thought of it felt as though it would tear Shiori's heart to shreds. Alec stirred in her arms, then pulled loose of her sweet embrace, this time pulling her into his own chest.

"I will never let you go," he said. "I want you by my side. Let me stay by yours. Forever."

The warmth of his breath tickled her ears as he spoke. A shiver ran through her body.

"You are the reason I have decided to face my family, and my younger brother. And...her. It will take time, but I will put them behind me. And when I do, I want you to be my..."

His words were filled with passion, his lips practically touching her ear. All the same, his sentence went unfinished. Still, she sensed the unspoken words in the warmth of his breath, and she felt heat pulse through her body.

"But what about you...?" he asked.

"Hm?" Shiori's eyes went wide.

"You want to return home, do you not? Will you not leave me when you do so?"

"But I..."

If the day came that I could return home.

Shiori felt her lips trembling as she spoke.

"I want to be with you, always," she said. "I don't even want to think of a day when we must part. You are a natural part of my life now, and just as much a part of me."

She had wanted to go home. And had there been a way, she would have tried to take it, no matter the cost. But that was then...and this was now. Now she had things in this world that mattered to her. Precious, valuable things she did not want to let go of. There were people who looked after her. There was her lapis-colored friend. And here, now, there was the person she loved and held dearer than any other.

"Were it possible for me to return home," she said, "I would want to see my friends and my family, and to thank them for all they did

for me. But I don't want to leave you, Alec. I long to be with you. To stay with you. Let me be by your side."

His arms tightened around her, so strong she felt she might stop breathing, but even then, it filled her with joy.

"I will never let you go," he said. "No matter what."

"Thank you, Alec."

She had him in her life. He was connected to her through his powerful arms. One by one, he was helping her to pick up the pieces of all the things she had lost, and so, she felt at home here with him.

"Um... Alec?"

"Hm?"

"I still... I don't know how to talk about it yet, but...when the time comes that I am ready, I want to tell you about my home. Though I fear it will surprise you."

She would tell him, one day, of the place that had made her what she was.

"Surprise me...? You've surprised me so many times now I don't know if you even could anymore. Not even if you told me you're a celestial maiden who fell from the heavens themselves."

Shiori gasped. But she was sure he didn't mean anything by it—it was just an example, a joke. Alec laughed.

"Whatever surprises you may still have for me, know that I will accept them all. Anything, everything, and all of you."

His fingers traced her lips. In his dark magenta eyes was a fierce passion.

"Thank you..."

His fingers moved from her lips to her cheek, lifting her face so he could place his lips upon her own. This was not the gentle kiss she was used to him opening with—it was far more passionate and intense.

His hand moved from her cheek to the nape of her neck, holding her tight. She shivered with a sliver of hesitancy at his overwhelming intensity, at his passionate feelings for her. His free hand traced sensually across the light garments she wore as pajamas, touching her neck and her collarbone, her back and her hips, and the edge of her breast.

"Alec..."

She let his name escape her lips between his passionate kisses. A light smile touched his face but he did not stop—he instead grew even more passionate in his embrace. She caught words escaping between his breaths, and she knew they were no lie.

"I love you," he said.

And so Shiori, too, wanted to share her heart. Between her own panting breaths, no louder than a whisper, she spoke the words of her

homeworld, which mirrored Alec's own.
“*Daisuki.*”



Part 2: Vows in White

Chapter 1: The Truth of the Past Comes to Light

1

Shiori woke with the wondrous comfort of having slept somewhere safe and secure. Light cut into the room through the gap in the curtains, and she looked at the town outside. The skies were beautifully clear—a rarity for the season—and the fresh snow glittered under the rays of the sun. Kids ran around under a sky of blue, their voices drifting up through the air.

“What a wonderful night’s sleep.”

Sunrise came late in the winter here, and Shiori was surprised to discover that it was already around nine. She could only chuckle at how long she’d slept. It showed how tired she really was. Thankfully, Annelie had accounted for this and reserved breakfast for quite late in the morning.

Nadia woke after Shiori, and Rurii did its stretches on the floor. Based on the sounds she could hear from the room next door, it sounded like Alec and Clemens were up and about too.

Shiori got dressed and left her room just as Alec and Clemens were doing the same.

“Good morning,” she said.

“Morning.”

Clemens still looked tired, but his listless gaze and his natural good looks wafted with a new sensuality. He was a special kind of good-looking—it seemed unfair that his beauty only increased with his weariness.

Shiori was relieved to see that Alec had gotten some sleep. The marks under his eyes were gone and the color had returned to his face. His eyes narrowed gently as he smiled.

“Let’s head to see the margravine, shall we?” said Nadia.

The breakfast that Annelie had invited them to was set to be something of a luxurious affair. She was so pleased with their efforts on the expedition that she had insisted on treating them to a meal as thanks.

“Have to admit, I am starving,” said Alec.

“Well, it was only bread and soup last night.”

“Such a pain to choose a meal when you’re tired, huh?”

It had already been some ten hours since any of them had last eaten, and their stomachs rumbled in anticipation.

Oh dear—what if I don't know the appropriate table manners...?

Based on the menu they'd all received from Walt the previous evening, their breakfast could almost be called a dinner party of sorts. Shiori worried that it would require a particular kind of table manners. None of this mattered when you were eating at a campsite, of course, but it made her nervous to think of dining in a more proper setting, and in noble company.

I know that big brother and sister taught me table manners, but still...

That said, she thought her table manners were perhaps only just a cut above children who were still learning.

Zack and many of the others knew how to comport themselves in front of the nobility, as they often encountered them in the course of their work. Shiori had seen them on more than a few occasions dressed in formal attire to meet some noble or another, and it always struck her how much they looked just like nobles themselves. She was certain it would be no different for Alec, who himself came from a noble upbringing.

"I'm going to stick out like a sore thumb..."

But perhaps they would be willing to overlook her slights, being that she was of a foreign Eastern culture. In contrast to Shiori, Rurii had been bouncing around happily all morning—the slime couldn't have been more excited.

When they arrived at Annelie's room, they were met by a fully dressed Dennis. Instead of the stern, unpleasant expression he'd shot them when they first met, he now wore a friendly grin. It made Shiori happy to think that their journey together had helped ease his nerves.

"Good morning," said Shiori.

"Sleep well? Beautiful morning, isn't it?"

Annelie was relaxing on the room's long sofa, but she put her sketchbook and pencil down and stood to greet them.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," said Shiori.

Annelie took Shiori's hand with a bright smile.

"Think nothing of it—we only just woke up ourselves."

Annelie pulled Shiori along into the dining room and with a quiet insistence, took Shiori to a specific seat at the table. The margravine then took the seat next to her.

"Er...um..." muttered Shiori, unsure of what to do.

Shiori watched, still confused, as Alec and Clemens were seated next to her, and Nadia on Annelie's other side. Once the adventurers were all seated, Dennis and Walt took their own seats, directly opposite Shiori. They chuckled at her confusion.

"Our apologies, but I hope you don't mind entertaining Annie's

wishes for a touch longer.”

“She said she wants the company of beautiful women on either side of her.”

“Beautiful...women...?”

Nadia was certainly charming, but when it came to herself, Shiori wasn't so sure. She looked down at her hands bashfully, and under the table, Alec touched one of them with a gentle smile.

Shiori still wasn't sure what to make of it all when Dennis rang the bell for breakfast. Their meal had been prepared by the inn's own staff, and at the sound of the bell they entered from a separate room and began serving the food. Their actions were well-practiced and smooth, and it seemed they had experience working with nobles.

It was a relief to realize that breakfast would be a single plate filled with a variety of different cuisines. It was very much aimed at nobles with its immaculate preparation and carefully selected ingredients, but none of it was anything that involved particularly complex table manners.

“This style of cuisine has become very commonplace of late,” said Annelie as she looked at the large white plates, colored brightly with different foods.

“It wasn't always common?” asked Shiori.

“Not at all. It wasn't around when I was a child.”

“Originally, this was the style of the working class,” said Nadia.

“They would split their leftovers between themselves on single plates.”

Back then, such a meal was considered beneath the nobility. However, over the last ten years, it had become a more refined experience as renowned chefs had tried their hands at it. These days, it wasn't at all uncommon to find such meals served at even the most luxurious and high-quality of restaurants.

“It was His Majesty's idea, originally,” said Annelie. “He was utterly taken by it when he visited a factory on one of his secret inspections.”

Despite the way it first appeared, he was entirely charmed at the way the meal allowed one to enjoy a variety of food on a single plate.

“It all started when he asked that it be served in the castle dining hall,” continued the margravine. “He knew how busy everyone was, and sure enough, it was a hit—people loved being able to enjoy such a meal between meetings with foreign dignitaries and the like.”

“Serving and cleaning is made easier too, which also made it a hit with the servers and maids,” added Dennis.

“Wow...” uttered Shiori. “It reminds me of the first aid carriage. The king is certainly very considerate of all his people. He must be a tremendous individual...”

This was the way in which Shiori had come to know of the king—

through the way his people spoke of him. His father had passed away relatively early, and though he had taken the throne while still just a teenager, his people loved him. Though some criticized him for being too progressive, these people were in the minority.

Annelie urged them all to eat, which they did over easy conversation. The plate included a red sugared radish soup, a warm salad of seasonal vegetables, marinated Tris salmon, bite-size lamb sauté, and fresh pancakes.

“It’s delicious...” said Shiori.

All of it was well prepared to accentuate the flavors of each ingredient, and Shiori could tell that each part of the meal had been handled with great care.

“Speaking of the king,” said Shiori. “Does he often go out on secret inspections? You mentioned during our expedition that he met his slime on a similar outing.”

“Well...” started Annelie, tilting her head in thought, “I’ve heard that sometimes he simply vanishes, and it leaves his aides in utter panic. That said, it never seems to get in the way of his actual duties as the leader of the nation, so nobody can get particularly up in arms about it.”

A ruler with a love of escape and exploration... The thought of such a mischievous king made Shiori giggle.

“He sounds exceptionally talented in a variety of different ways,” she said.

Annelie giggled.

“Yes. But I have to imagine that someone had words for him when he returned to the castle with a slime in tow.”

“It seems likely, doesn’t it? I remember when I told people I was making Rurii my familiar—many wondered if I was actually serious about it.”

Shiori felt that slimes were stronger, smarter, and above all more adorable than people gave them credit for, but they still weren’t widely accepted. That said, Rurii had definitely begun to win over hearts of late.

“If he’s out and about as often as they say, perhaps you’ve met him on your travels, even,” said Walt as he munched happily on his lamb sauté.

And it was possible that if he was indeed vanishing to explore his kingdom, that adventurers might pass him by on occasion. The idea of a story blooming through a secretive and coincidental meeting with the king—it was like something out of fairy tales and picture books.

“What does he look like?” asked Shiori.

“He’s very handsome. He has sharp features, skin as white as porcelain, wavy blond hair, and clear, dark magenta eyes. He’s exactly

what you'd picture in a prince charming."

"Wow..."

"He is often called cutthroat and stern when it comes to his leadership, so when I met him at my debutante ball I expected someone serious and steely. Contrary to my expectations, he was anything but—he was friendly and open."

Annelie's eyes grew a touch distant as she looked back on her past.

"He truly was very, very busy back then," she continued. "We shared a brief dance, but he looked to me a little worn out."

Apparently, it was customary for young royals who came of age to attend such balls to mark their entrance into society. At Annelie's event, there had been dancing with members of the royal family. The boys danced with the queen or princesses, while the girls danced with the king or princes.

"I remember him letting out a sigh as we danced," said Annelie. "That's very much a no-no in terms of manners. But he looked so very tired I felt compelled to ask if he was okay. He apologized for his rudeness and admitted that he was thinking about how much more at ease he would have been if his elder brother were in attendance. He looked so very lonely. I had heard talk of his strength, but in that moment I felt closer to him—I realized that even the strong have their moments of weakness."

"Elder brother?" asked Shiori. "The king has an elder brother?"

Shiori had always thought that the eldest member of the family inherited the throne—perhaps things were different in Storydia? Or, perhaps, there were other circumstances at play...

Annelie's eyebrows drooped a touch as she smiled.

"The king had three brothers. The eldest two perished in accidents, and the third disappeared just before the current king inherited the throne. I can't say much about the eldest two as they died around the time I was born, but I still remember quite clearly the commotion that came when the third prince disappeared. My father and grandfather were in grave talks for some consecutive days."

"Everyone wondered if he'd been driven out or otherwise assassinated due to the arguments over who would take the throne," said Walt quietly. "Hard to believe it's been eighteen years since..."

"The leading thought these days is that he disappeared," said Dennis. "It is said that the king and the prince—no, perhaps 'royal elder brother' is most apt—were extremely close. One theory is that the elder brother disappeared of his own accord, while another says the king helped him to escape somewhere safe. Rumors, yes, but it's true to say that the royal elder brother was in a weakened position, being an illegitimate child."

“The royal family went through a string of misfortunes around that time,” said Annelie. “It was nothing if not chaotic. First the two princes, then the queen, and just a few years later the king himself became bedridden. There were many who looked to take advantage of the situation to boost their own standing, and they split into factions behind the king’s two remaining sons. I can’t imagine how it must have felt for the two of them, to be so close, and yet to be forced to oppose each other like that.”

“I can’t believe all that happened...” uttered Shiori.

The country of Storydia was so peaceful and so calm, and yet something like this had still occurred within its borders.

“I think when the king spoke to me of his elder brother at that ball,” said Annelie, “he was most likely talking of that royal elder brother. Many said they were the ideal siblings, always supporting one another...”

Annelie’s words drifted off into the air, and a quiet fell across the table. Alec continued to eat in silence, a strained look on his face, while Nadia and Clemens both looked deeply saddened. It was an incident that happened twenty years ago, and yet it still had the power to cast shadows across the hearts of Storydia’s people. Shiori felt compelled to find a way to change the heavy mood, and so she spoke a thought that flitted to her mind.

“Speaking of beautiful men with golden blond hair and dark magenta eyes, I’ve met one. I think he would have been about my age, or perhaps a touch older.”

Those particular features weren’t exactly rare in the country, so Shiori felt it was most likely someone different. Nonetheless, Alec raised his head, his curiosity piqued.

“Where did you meet him?”

“It must have been a few weeks ago. He was lost so I helped him to his hotel.”

“He was lost?”

“Yes. He said he was in Storydia to check on his older brother, who was ill. He’d been out for a walk and lost his way entirely. But it wasn’t just his looks—he had such beautiful grace in the way he held himself.”

Thinking back, it would have been near the end of autumn. He’d had a man with flaxen hair in tow, and it was clear by his bearing that he was a high-ranking noble. Shiori remembered being shocked by the flirtatious way that they’d parted ways, but she opted not to mention this at the table.

Alec wore a somewhat skeptical, wry grin.

“A sick older brother, huh...?” he muttered.

“But he didn’t have a slime with him, so I guess it wasn’t the

king?" said Shiori.

"That's how you're going to judge things? By whether he had a slime with him or not?"

Alec's expression changed in an instant as he burst into laughter.

"If all it took was spotting a blond-haired man with a peach-colored slime, identifying His Majesty would be child's play," added Nadia.

"Good point," admitted Shiori.

"He does appear very fond of his slime, so perhaps he hides it when he's on his travels?" wondered Annelie. "I bet he keeps it in a knapsack or something."

Shiori pictured the beautiful blond man with a peach-colored slime hidden in his knapsack. The thought of it was so absurd it brought laughter she simply couldn't hold in, and the rest of the table laughed along with her. Even Rurii, sitting at Shiori's feet, trembled with delight.

All the same...

Eighteen years ago. A sick king. An illegitimate son. A battle for inheritance. The disappearance of the older brother.

Shiori shot a fleeting glance at Alec, who was chatting with Clemens. When he noticed, he asked her if something was on her mind, but she brushed it off with a smile and went back to her food.

"...to still feel this after twenty years."

"When my father fell ill, a question arose of who would inherit his position—me, his illegitimate son, or my younger brother, his legitimate heir."

It all lined up almost too neatly. Was it just a coincidence? An unplaceable doubt and suspicion gnawed away at Shiori's heart, filling it with uncertainty. If he was not just nobility, but *royalty*, then what did that mean for her...?

But it can't be possible. I'm letting my imagination get the better of me.

And with that single thought, Shiori extinguished the suspicions in her heart. The remainder of their late breakfast went smoothly and easily, and came to a close just as the clock bells rang to indicate the arrival of noon.

When their meal was over, Walt made tea. The scent of it drifted from the living room—a pleasant aroma with the slight hint of sweet apricot thanks to the fruit oil he'd added. The joy was evident in the smile it brought to Shiori's face as she sipped at it.

The men in this country are so good at making tea...

Perhaps it was just part of the job for one like Walt, but Mikal had also made them tea at the watchpost the previous day, and he was a knight. It reminded Shiori of Lache, her apartment landlord, and how he, too, brewed a wonderful cup of tea. She was lost in thoughts of

whether or not tea-making was an essential skill for the men of Storydia when Annelie put her cup on its saucer and straightened her posture.

"I would like to take this opportunity to thank each of you once again for all your hard work. We truly gained so much from this journey, and we accomplished the goal we set out to achieve. We could not have done it without all of you. I am truly thankful, and beyond grateful."

Shiori, Alec, and her companions all shared smiles. Shiori did not need to shy away in humility from these words of gratitude, which came from Annelie's heart—it was best to simply accept them as they were.

Shiori put a hand to her chest. She felt both bashful and a great sense of accomplishment, and yet her heart ached with the sadness of their inevitable parting. Though they had shared but a few days together on their expedition, they had eaten and slept together, overcome dangers, and through the accomplishment of their goals, become friends. Annelie and her aides were honest people with good hearts, and it made Shiori lonely to know that they had to say goodbye. After all, she was just a commoner and an adventurer, while Annelie was distinguished nobility—their individual standings were worlds apart, and it seemed likely they might never meet again.

It's work, and that's the way work goes, but I can't help feeling the ache of loneliness...

At that moment, Dennis cleared his throat and somewhat hesitantly, began to speak.

"I would like to make an apology," he said. His cheeks were red with embarrassment, but when he looked at Shiori, it was clear that he had resolved to say his piece. "Especially to you, Shiori, for how uncomfortable I made you all feel, and my rude behavior. You did nothing wrong, and yet I humiliated you. For that, I am so terribly sorry."

Dennis's head of red hair dropped into a deep, apologetic bow.

"No, please think nothing of it," replied Shiori, slightly panicked. "You've already apologized, you mustn't let it bother you."

"Be that as it may..."

"Yes, I admit that I was...surprised," said Shiori, "and even saddened."

Dennis had made his thoughts and feelings clear the moment they'd met. And she had thought this perhaps better than attempting fake kindness, particularly for one like Dennis, whose heart was practically transparent.

Dennis waited for her to speak, but he did not drop his gaze from Shiori's own. Whatever harsh words she might have in store for him,

he was prepared to accept them.

“But it was you, Dennis, who truly accepted my memories of the past,” said Shiori. “It was terribly lonely for me to come to Storydia with nothing but my memories as proof of who I was. But you accepted and recognized those memories—and you made me so very happy.”

All it had taken was a taste of Shiori’s soup. *You were raised in a good home*, he’d said. *You know the warmth of a good family, for it is there in the taste of your meals*, he’d said. And in doing so, he recognized the memories that had shaped her person—he saw them as real things.

“I don’t begrudge you anything, Dennis,” Shiori continued. “If anything, I am grateful. So please, do not let it bother you.”

“I, er...well, if you insist on putting it that way, then...my apologies. And thank you.”

The flustered Dennis then nodded awkwardly, his face going red and his eyes unsure of where to settle.

He really is an open book, isn’t he...?

Annelie smiled as she watched him, and then her eyes met Shiori’s.

“On this particular journey, it was not just a new theme I was searching for,” she said. “It was a ritual, and a trial—it was a way for Dennis and I to break free of the things that bound us and tied us down. It was a necessity, both for us as people, and for the future of the Lovner family. Of course we could not have gone somewhere so dangerous on our own, but at the same time, it was you, Shiori, who helped Dennis to free his heart. You were the catalyst, and for that I am truly grateful.”

She reached out with her supple fingers and took Shiori’s hand. It was just as she’d done when they went for breakfast, but Shiori felt a touch panicked at how close they were.

“And also, Shiori,” said Annelie. “I have one more request. Not as a client, but as an individual. As me.”

“Erm...yes?”

An individual request? The words sent a nervous shiver through Shiori, but Annelie’s eyes were filled with passion.

“I want us to be friends.”

“Oh?”

Shiori blinked. She was shocked by the margravine’s “request.” Alec and the other adventurers were also surprised—they looked from Shiori to Annelie, and then at one another.

“I feel so comfortable around you,” said Annelie. “You never put yourself too far away, but you never get so close as to make one uncomfortable—you are always as close as you need to be. You draw

the line where you have to, but you have such a big and generous heart. You're not just kind—you have a real strength at the core of who you are, and I love that about you."

"Annelie..."

Had Shiori been a male, she was sure that the margravine would have just won her heart. This was no mere flattery—it was clear from Annelie's eyes that she was speaking from a place of honesty.

"I know that you carry a weight of your own," said Annelie. "And perhaps it is something that has made you who you are. But I fell in love with that part of you—the part of you that, even with all that you must bear, still chooses to live."

Shiori's eyes went wide with surprise. But when she saw Alec's eyes go even wider—until then, he'd simply been watching calmly over the proceedings—she burst into laughter, which seemed to calm her down afterwards.

There was no deeper meaning to Annelie's use of the word "love." Still, it made Shiori so very happy that Annelie had said it as an honest expression of her feelings.

"I...I realized a lot on this expedition," said Shiori. "Dennis helped me to feel confident in my own memories, but I also came to understand, through being with all of you, that I'm not alone, and that there's still so much I can do."

She had met Alec, they had fallen in love, and they had become partners. For them to have such clients on their first job together was incredibly good fortune. Annelie had been troubled and worried, but she had resolved to face and overcome her own difficulties. By spending time with Annelie and her aides, and by talking with her love and her kind companions, Shiori had decided to take stock of that which she had given up, and that which she had turned her back on, and face them once more.

"I left everything I had," she said, "and I can no longer return home. I left behind everything that was important to me, and everything that made me who I was. It made me feel like a fleeting, vague, and invisible person...and I thought of myself as someone without a home."

A part of Shiori wanted to look away—to look down at the floor—but she kept her head high, and her gaze forward. She had a lover who would wrap her in his arms, and she had strong, trustworthy companions, and though they were not all here right now, she had a brother who watched over her and coworkers who looked out for her.

"I didn't think there was anywhere in the world where I belonged, but the people around me made a place for me... They welcomed me, and there's so much in my life now that is irreplaceable. Now I know how it feels to have that. And I realized that because you requested

me for this expedition, so...I'm grateful too. Thank you so much."

"Shiori..." Annelie said, squeezing her hand. "The realizations you've had, and the people around you who care for you so deeply, all of that is a result of *your* efforts. You are beautiful because even when the world was at its heaviest you did your best just to push on and live. You can, and you should, be so proud of that. And that's why I ask that, one day, you let me paint that unique beauty."

Shiori could not hide her surprise.

"As it stands, I do not have the ability to capture the essence of it," said Annelie. "But I will endeavor to improve, and when I feel ready, I want you to be my model. I don't care if it's not a nude painting. I want to paint the person you are, and to that end, I want to know you more deeply. I want to learn who you are, and I just want to talk to you so much more. The thought of us parting, and of this being the last we see of each other...it makes me so lonely."

"Annelie..."

The margravine shared the same loneliness as Shiori, and there was joy in that connection.

"I must admit that the idea of being a model for one of your paintings is most embarrassing, but...after I have taken a deep look at who I am, and when I have truly accepted who that person is...I will gladly do so."

Shiori knew that it would take time, but in this she was resolute.

Annelie's face bloomed like a spring flower at Shiori's words.

"Thank you, Shiori!" she said, beaming. "First Dennis and I were able to share our hearts, then I discovered a new goal for my art, and on top of that I've made a wonderful new friend! And speaking of, now that we're friends, no more of that acting like you're at my beck and call, okay? I want you to call me Annie, and I'll drop the lordlike formalities too. How does that sound?"

"Um...well..."

Shiori was, unsurprisingly, hesitant. Being friends was one thing, but to call a noble by their nickname? Was that even acceptable? She cast a pleading look at Alec and her companions for help, but they only looked back at her with wry grins and warm smiles—this was her moment, not theirs. Rurii didn't offer help either, and simply trembled happily in place.

"I know what you're like," said Annelie, "and I know you'll want to make our positions clear in public, but when we're together in private I want you to be at ease around me. I mean, we're around the same age, after all, so what's the harm?"

Shiori paused for a second.

"I...hm?"

Around the same age? The words caused Shiori's head to

involuntarily tilt in confusion. *Isn't Annelie in her late twenties?*

Noting the confusion, Dennis decided to step in.

"Annie... I dare say it's a little rude of you to say such things. Anyone can tell that she's clearly younger than you."

"I...hm?"

Despite his best efforts, Dennis had unknowingly only made things worse. Shiori knew that Japanese people often looked young on account of their youthful features and short statures, and she had experienced this firsthand numerous times since arriving in Storydia. Nonetheless, this was all too much.

Nadia and Clemens chuckled—they'd seen this scene play out before, in the past. Nadia had been able to accurately guess Shiori's age by taking stock of her hands, the nape of her neck, and her general bearing, but Clemens and Zack had judged her entirely on her build and stature and, just like Dennis now, had thought her much younger than she actually was.

Come to think of it, big brother had also judged me by the size of my chest...

It seemed that it wasn't just her height, but also Shiori's modest chest size that had Zack thinking she was younger than she was. Just remembering it left Shiori with complicated, somewhat embarrassed feelings. It was fair to say she was smaller than most Storydian women, but in Japan she was entirely ordinary. She was by no means flat-chested.

"Dennis, might I remind you that while some women appreciate being called young, it is rude to see someone as significantly younger than they are. In fact, did you know that some women even use the word disparagingly at times?"

"Er..." started Shiori.

Annelie was exactly right, and Shiori thought it best to clear the air right there and then.

"Actually, I...I'm the same age as Alec," she said.

The three nobles fell into immediate silence. After a moment of deep thought, Walt for some reason looked at Nadia very closely, for which he received a scathing glare in reply and seemed to shrink in place. Dennis, meanwhile, was in shock. Annelie, for her part, reached out excitedly to touch Shiori's face.

"But this marvelously clear skin...is it something you've worked at yourself, or is it perhaps some kind of Eastern mystery...?"

"Oh deeeaaaar..." moaned Shiori.

A sudden and unstoppable fire of curiosity had lit within Annelie, and fortunately Dennis and Walt came to their senses in time to pull her off of Shiori. Shiori shot Alec a quick glare for laughing at her, then let out a sigh of relief. Alec put a reassuring hand on her back,

though his irresponsible smile remained.

“Well, at the end of the day,” he said, “I’d say it’s a good outcome. You’ve made yourself a most precious friend today.”

“Yes,” Shiori replied. “More people I am so glad to have in my life.”

They were strong, honest, kind, and fun—and the thought of meeting them again brought a great joy to Shiori’s heart.

“Torisval and the Lovner Domain are quite far apart, which means we may not be able to meet frequently,” said Annelie, reaching out once more to touch Shiori’s hand. “But once I have some time, I’ll come to see you. So please, come visit us occasionally too.”

“That goes for me too, Shiori,” said Dennis. “There’s so much in regards to cooking I’d still love for you to teach me. And I’ll need some of that soy sauce of yours too.”

“Count me in!” added Walt. “I will never get tired of your cooking, Shiori!”

Shiori smiled at the kind words and nodded.

“Sounds great,” she said. “I look forward to meeting you all again!”

They were friends she had made on a journey through the extreme cold, and treasures in the life which she now lived in another world.

“Oh, and before I forget,” said Alec. “I forgot to mention these.”

In the midst of their friendly conversation, Alec brought forth a small bag. It was filled with the magic stones that they’d found in Silveria Tower. When he opened it up on the tray in between all of them, the nobles let out awed gasps.

“My... They’re so beautiful,” uttered Annelie.

“Such a vibrant red... Did you happen to find these in that room on the third floor?” asked Dennis.

“Yes,” replied Alec. “They’re fire stones.”

He poured the bag into the tray, where the stones piled into a little red mountain.

“There were this many, huh?” uttered Clemens as he took one in his hand. “You’ll fetch quite the coin for all of these.”

Annelie, Dennis, and Walt all took a stone in hand also, staring at them with great interest. Rurii, too, took out the stone Alec had given it and playfully rolled it around on the floor with a feeler.

“We picked them up but with everything that happened afterwards, I completely forgot I was even carrying them. Clemens isn’t lying—they’ll fetch a nice price. With that in mind, I thought it best to bring them to your attention.”

As a general Guild rule, anything gathered during an expedition was considered the property of the adventurers. However, in the case of rare or valuable items, the exact handling of said items was decided

after discussion with the client.

“After thinking about it, I figured we could split them between us. Half and half.”

“Oh, really?” asked Annelie. “Isn’t half too much?”

Shiori laughed.

“It’s fine. The three of you all did your fair share, after all.

Annel...er, Annie drew that monster sketch for us, and Dennis and Walt, you both helped us to carry the Imperials back to town. Dennis, you also helped Frol remember not to give up when he’d lost hope, and of course...you recognized my memories.”

“Indeed,” added Nadia, “and besides, the journey was also cause for celebration. Why not take them as something by which to remember the occasion?”

The three nobles shared smiles between one another and nodded.

“Well, how can we possibly say no now?” asked Annelie. “Thank you so much, everyone.”

Alec split the stones up by hand.

“They’re so wondrously round,” remarked Annelie as she rolled one around on her palm. “I’d expect raw stones to be more like rocks.”

“I think it’s because of the environment in which they were produced,” said Alec. “Normally magic stones *are* more like little rocks.”

The magic stones produced inside of magical beasts were often like misshapen rocks. However, there were some beasts that produced smoother, rounder stones, though they were decidedly rare.

“I see. All the same, they’re such a beautiful red...” said Annelie, holding her stone up to the light. “I love red. It’s so fierce and passionately fiery, and yet at the same time kind and warm...”

“My oh my,” said Nadia. “Is it a stone you’re talking about, or perhaps a person?”

Annelie’s cheeks flushed red.

“Oh, I...I didn’t think I meant it like that, though...perhaps, in some way I did.”

At that point, Dennis, who had been wondering what they were talking about, suddenly put it together and blushed. The room filled with laughter.

“Though it pains me to say it,” said Alec after the laughter subsided, “we really should be heading home, soon.”

It was a short journey that had felt so much longer, and now it had come to its end.

“Oh, really? I thought perhaps you might stay another evening,” said Annelie sadly.

“I won’t lie—we’re all tired. At the same time, though, it’s something we’re used to.”

"Indeed," added Nadia. "That and, well, the work never ends."

"Wow, you guys really are professionals," remarked Walt.

"That they are," added Dennis, rubbing his legs. "To be entirely honest, my legs have been aching all morning."

He then added, with a chuckle, that it was the very reason he'd had the inn staff handle setting the table for breakfast.

"I simply can't imagine having to sit in a carriage today," he said. "I really need to rest these legs another night."

"I like to think I'm used to working in the outdoors," said Walt, "but that was one heck of a day. And I suppose there's that muscle-boosting magic to blame too."

"Quite possibly," said Alec with a wry chuckle. "That magic is a bit like taking out a debt on your physical strength—you end up paying it back later. Make sure you take it easy and rest well."

"I very much intend for them to do just that," said Annelie. "It was following my wishes that got them here, after all. We'll head back to the Lovner domain once they've both had more of a chance to rest. Things are going to be very busy upon our return."

First there was the announcement of their intended marriage, then the wedding preparations, which meant organizing the Lovner servants and staff and making sure they were up to date with what was going on. In other words, there would be no shortage of things to do. The life of nobles wasn't all just luxury and fun and games. Though marriage was an occasion to celebrate, there were still many traditions and customs they would have to navigate—especially for Annelie.

Nonetheless, Shiori was certain they were up to the task, especially after having been through a journey as tough as this one, where they had opened their hearts and resolved to live the rest of their lives together.

Annelie signed their request ticket. Alec confirmed it, then tucked it away in his notebook. The nobles then attempted to follow them all down the stairs to see them off, but Shiori stopped them.

"Oh. Really, here is fine," said Shiori from the top of the stairs. "No need to overdo it."

She had a feeling that Dennis and Walt were hurting much more than they let on.

"If you insist," said Dennis, as he and Walt shared a wry grin. "I dare say I wouldn't be able to make it back up the stairs if I saw you to the door."

"Oh, parting is such agony," said Annelie. "But I promise, I'll come to see you."

The margravine wrapped Shiori in a big hug, and she caught the light scent of peppermint in the air. It was just like Annelie—

refreshing and breezy.

“As I will endeavor to see you again too,” said Shiori. “I’ll write you.”

“Oh, I can’t wait. Promise me you will. Everyone, thank you so much.”

“Just doing our job. Until next time,” said Alec.

“Safe travels.”

The adventurers and the nobles shook hands and shared parting words, and the adventurers left. As their carriage trundled along the road, Shiori looked out the window to the town of Silveria, as well as the tower, wrapped in forest. She watched until they blended with the snowy scenery and vanished from sight completely.

Silveria was a word that, in the language of old Storydia, meant “silver,” and it looked to her then like a sparkling canvas of white, waiting for the vibrant hues of the coming season to color it.

“Looks like a great weight’s been taken from your shoulders, Dennis,” said Walt, as his friend watched the adventurers from the window. “That’s good.”

“Yes,” Dennis replied with a smile. “I really do feel like I can finally turn over a new, positive leaf. Upon our return, there are so many people I have to apologize to for the worry and trouble I’ve caused. I’ll have to announce the marriage to grandfather too. I’m sure the news will delight him.”

Walt’s own smile faded in that moment, as if something cold had suddenly forced it into hiding. He turned away from his friend, who hadn’t noticed and was still basking in his happiness.

“I truly hope that is the case...” Walt whispered.

He could not help but remember the muddy feelings that had wafted from the old man’s dim eyes the last time they’d seen him.

2

It was around four in the afternoon when the carriage arrived in Torisval. The curtain of evening had fallen, sinking the world into the darkness of night. The four adventurers and their slime companion alighted the carriage in front of the Adventurers’ Guild, and then watched it disappear into the distance.

“We’re home.”

Sunset came early in the winter, but the Guild’s business hours never changed. It was night outside, but several of their adventuring brethren were still at the Guild. Zack looked up from some documents and smiled as they walked in.

“Welcome back,” he said. “I trust everything went well?”

“That it did,” said Alec, passing him their request ticket.

Zack looked it over with a satisfied smile.

“A perfect satisfaction rating. Well done. How about that troublemaker...Dennis, was it? Was he okay?”

Zack had met Annelie and Dennis before the expedition and there'd been a little trouble. Clearly, Zack had been worried it might cause problems for them during the job—and, to be fair, at the start of the journey there had been.

“It was no problem,” said Shiori. “He wasn’t such a bad person, and now he’s our friend... Turns out he’s quite cute and honest once you get to know him.”

“Huh? Friends...? Cute...?”

Zack couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Alec, Clemens, and Nadia shared a hearty laugh at the shock on the man’s face. Zack’s reaction was only natural, though—Dennis was bad-tempered and had a strong dislike of immigrants, so it was only natural that he couldn’t work out how on earth they’d become friends. Not to mention Shiori thinking him cute...

“A lot happened on the expedition,” said Alec. “The man was carrying his own unique burden. When I saw how rude he was to Shiori at first, I had my doubts about working with him, but it turns out Dennis is a man of strong resolve.”

Zack’s expression said everything: *Are we talking about the same guy?*

With his confusion obvious, the adventurers filled him in on the details of their expedition—their first encounter with Dennis, the road to the tower, the Imperials and the state of the tower itself, Annelie’s true motives, the flooding they faced, and the journey back home with two sick people in tow.

Zack wore a worried frown as he heard about the Imperial adventurers and the flooding, but it turned into a look of sympathy as he learned about Dennis’s situation, then one of shock when he found out they’d encountered what might have been a mythical beast.

“If that beast turns out to be an actual Yeti, you can bet it’s going to cause quite the stir,” said Zack, keeping his voice low as they discussed it.

“That’s exactly why the knights asked us not to say anything about it until they’re able to properly investigate it,” said Shiori, tallying her experience points on a magical device known as the experience calculator.

In order to ensure safety and avoid dangerous situations, the knights and Adventurers’ Guild were in the habit of sharing information. That said, it was clear to all that should news leak of a mythical beast, it would cause unease and unrest among the local

populace. Until the beast was properly identified, it was best not to say a word even to their fellow adventurers.

"I can see why. If news like that goes public, you're going to have the newspapers and the eccentrics digging around in the snow. Not to mention idiots with an appetite for experience points."

Zack was worried it would result in even more work for them in the Silveria area, and he ruffled his red hair with a worried hand and a firm grimace. Then he took a look at Shiori's calculation results, and let out a slight gasp.

"You're rolling in experience this time, huh?" he said.

"Oh? Let me see," said Alec.

"Me too," added Nadia, followed by a, "wow."

"Whoa," said Clemens. "Hang on a sec."

Shiori's three companions crowded around as Shiori showed them her results. The needle on the calculator pointed to just below maximum points on the scale.

"Ah...it's probably because of the Yeti."

"Most likely. It's so surprising, though. The calculator isn't broken, is it?" asked Shiori.

The calculator measured a variety of numerical data points, including the circulation of an adventurer's magical energy, and from that it calculated experience gained. On occasion, when the calculator was broken, it would spit out unbelievable results.

"I doubt it. In the end, *you* were the one who struck the finishing blow. With that in mind, these numbers aren't strange in the slightest," said Clemens. "Let me run my own numbers."

Clemens took to the calculator. In the end, the needle rose to around one-fourth of the way up the scale and stopped. Clemens was a much higher level than Shiori, so he received less experience when fighting the same monsters.

"Including both the horned hare variant and the Yeti, this is about right. The calculator is fine," he said with a smile.

"Oh...is that so? That's good."

"All right then," said Zack. "Let's get this added to your record. Congratulations, Shiori—you've leveled up."

"Wow! Thanks, big brother."

"Great job. Congratulations," said Alec.

"Thank you. The big monsters give the biggest rewards, I guess."

It had been something of a unique way to fell the beast, but there was no doubting that Shiori had struck the finishing blow. That gave her the lion's share of the experience. Though support types received experience too, it was not as much as those who fought on the front lines, face-to-face with the enemy.

The reason for this was simple—the experience calculator had

been designed with vanguards in mind. This made it difficult for support and rearguard adventurers to level up, which was a source of problems—it was why even though they all worked under the same circumstances, these support and rearguard adventurers ended up with lower levels than their vanguard counterparts. At the same time, contribution rates were decided based on the client's satisfaction rating, so these numbers would be about the same between vanguards and rear guards.

What emerged from this process was low-leveled rear guards with high adventurer ranks. Shiori herself was at a level that could barely be called middle of the range. Ellen, a B-rank physicker, was in a similar situation, and though Nils was A-rank, his level was even lower on account of never taking part in battle. This lack of parity between level and adventurer rank was seen as unfair by many vanguards. The root of this line of thought came from the idea which some vanguards had that it was a form of cheating.

Shiori had heard that a rearguard and support-specific calculator was in development, but finding a good baseline for such a diverse range of classes was no easy task. Actual implementation of this calculator, then, was still a long way off. Some even thought that rather than develop a new calculator, the level system should be abolished and replaced purely by the rank system. However, the level system more easily connected with motivation on account of the fact that adventurers could see their hard work in the form of numbers. There was also the issue that because the rank system relied on the subjective opinions of clients and companions, it was not impartial.

Both had their advantages and disadvantages. Recently, more and more were thinking that a new system needed to be implemented—one that combined the best of both the level and rank systems. The current systems in place at the Guild had been introduced back when the number of classes was fairly limited. It was from a past era, and needed to be updated.

“For rear guards, and especially for support types, leveling up is so difficult...” Nadia muttered, her beautiful eyebrows drooping sympathetically.

In the case of Akatsuki, these systemic problems had been exploited. Very few thought twice when a rear guard received less experience points than the rest of their party. And in Shiori's case, she had been given an intentionally faulty calculator. But even though the experience she received was very low, none thought this strange—not even Shiori herself. The requests that parties received, too, came largely from the Guild. As a result, it was the job of the guild master to rate those results—which made it all too easy for Shiori's appraisal ratings to be manipulated.

Zack and the others had eventually noticed that something wasn't right, and that the guild master might be involved. With the help of the Guild, they had attained a confidential copy of Shiori's assessment records. In order to ensure their actions would not be considered a problem later, Zack had used his S-rank rights to negotiate directly with Guild headquarters, and he was so serious he had even attained an investigator license.

"These experience points and assessment numbers aren't normal."

This was Clemens's conclusion when he realized it was possible that falsification was at work, and checked Shiori's records against her party members. Having been brought up in a merchant's family, Clemens was accustomed to working with numbers and data from a very young age. It was easy for him to see through the manipulation—Shiori's assessment records had been tampered with since even *before* she'd entered Akatsuki.

Ranvald must have had his eye on me for quite some time, before he ever made a move...

Ranvald, the guild master before Zack. He had taken the time to teach her magic, and also how to read and write. She had thought of him as a teacher. He struck her as a gentleman, someone kind to an outsider like herself. She had trusted him.

And this very trust was the reason that she had believed what he said to be true. In this way, little by little, she came to accept the incorrect information he fed her, and that was how things had ended up the way they did. It was possible that he had seen her as prey from the very moment he'd first laid eyes on her.

"All the same," said Zack, "you've done an amazing job, Shiori."

The voice stirred Shiori from her memories, and she listened as Zack went on.

"I'm really proud of all of you—you took a request from the distinguished Lovner family itself and they gave you a perfect rating. It'll raise the name of our guild branch too. Take a break, guys, you've earned it."

Zack's compliments were earnest, and they brightened the air among all of them. Even Rurii trembled happily at their feet. The four adventurers congratulated each other on a job well done, and talked happily among themselves as they decided to share a few celebratory drinks at a bar somewhere.

"The Lovner family?" said a voice by their side. "That takes me back. Haven't heard that name in a long time."

"I know. How long has it been now?"

The first voice belonged to Ludger, the magic swordsman. The woman who'd replied to him was the spearmaster, Marena. People knew the couple as the Lanellieds.

“Oh, you know them?” asked Shiori. “Are they that famous?”

“The two of us were born in the Lovner region,” explained Ludger. “We even started out at the Lovner branch of the Adventurers’ Guild.”

“Much easier to make money over this way though,” added Marena, “and besides, life in Tris suits us better. That’s why we transferred. I guess we’ve been here seven or eight years now.”

The couple smiled at one another, remembering the journey that had brought them here.

“Anyway, as for the Lovners, they used to be regular patrons of the Guild.”

“They were...but they severed all connections after Gerhard and Mario passed away. We were asked that the Guild not contact the family while they were grieving, and...well, I wonder what became of them after that?”

Alec and Clemens looked at each other. Alec put a hand to his jaw in thought. Clemens frowned. Something about the Lanellied’s words didn’t sit right with either of them.

“Something wrong?” asked Marena.

“This Gerhard you speak of,” said Alec. “Was his last name Fryden? He has a son by the name of Dennis.”

Both Ludger and Marena were taken aback.

“Yes, that’s the one... I don’t suppose you were an acquaintance of Gerhard’s, were you?” asked Ludger.

“No, nothing like that. Just familiar with the name. And Mario was an immigrant from the south, I presume?”

“That’s right,” replied Marena. “You know your stuff. I had no idea the accident was so well known.”

“Accident? What accident?” asked Alec.

“Wait, one more thing,” added Clemens. “Mario sounds like a male name...they weren’t female?”

“Well, from a distance you couldn’t tell one way or the other, but he was a male, all right. He was beautiful as long as he kept his mouth shut, but he was just another perverted old man the moment he opened it.”

Alec’s and Clemens’s frowns deepened, and Shiori became curious.

“Really, though, is something wrong, Alec?” she asked.

“Yeah, come on, you two—fill us in,” said Marena.

Alec and Clemens shared a hesitant glance but quickly nodded in agreement.

“What we heard was that Dennis’s father died in a double suicide...with a southern woman who was not his wife...”

“What?!”

“*What?!?*”

Ludger and Marena were beyond shocked.

“Whoa...” uttered Ludger after a moment. “How did a story like *that* spread around?”

“I...I don’t believe it,” said Marena. “Perhaps parts of the story were mistaken as it spread across the lands? It is true that Gerhard died with his partner, but it was Mario who died with him—another man. And it was no double suicide. They fell to their deaths while out gathering flowers—they were reaching for a flower that grows at the edge of cliff faces. Gerhard had told people himself—he wanted to give the flower to his wife as an anniversary present.”

Alec’s expression went cold.

“Something isn’t right about this. Could someone have...deliberately twisted the facts?”

Was it possible that it had been done to keep Dennis away from the Lovner family, and from Annelie?

3

The carriage stopped in front of the manor and a man alighted from it. He had a sword at his side—a clear sign that he was an adventurer. He reached for the hand of a woman, who then stepped outside into the snow. Even from a distance, her tanned skin and her wavy black hair were obvious, especially against the backdrop of the wintry white gardens. The two of them looked up at Lovner manor, designed in the Baverstam style. The woman’s gaze wandered, her eyes finding the office window, and then Annelie—or more likely Dennis, who stood behind his margravine. Dennis felt his breath catch in his throat at the sight of her face.

He noticed something listless and tired in the woman’s features as she looked away and disappeared behind the thick front doors of the manor.

“How...?” Dennis uttered. “How is she still alive...?”

She was supposed to be dead. Ten years ago, she had stolen his father from his mother, and then she had made his heart hers for eternity by...no. That was not what had really happened. His father had died together with a man.

In which case, who *was* this woman?

After a few moments, Walt appeared at the door, announcing the arrival of visitors.

“I’m here, Dennis...” said Annelie softly.

She could see the confusion that rooted Dennis in place. He looked up and replied with an awkward nod.

“Thank you.”

Walt flashed him a look of support, then led the two of them down the stairs to the sitting room, where the woman from the south

was waiting.

The letter had arrived some ten days after Annelie had returned to Lovner manor. It was from Shiori Izumi and Alec Dia, two of the adventurers that had accompanied her to Silveria Tower. She was overjoyed at the sight of it, though also somewhat puzzled that it had been sent via express post, which was rather expensive.

When she opened and read the letter, though, her face grew pale and her expression hardened. It began with seasonal greetings and a few remarks from Shiori, asking after the margravine's well-being and updating Annelie as to her own circumstances. Soon after, however, she wrote that something important had come up, and that Alec had enclosed a letter along with her own.

Alec's letter was, it turned out, the main reason the two adventurers had written her. Enclosed with it was a report, from the Lovner branch of the Adventurers' Guild, detailing an accident concerning two adventurers and a fall.

When Dennis read the letter and the report himself, he was left in shock.

The two adventurers in the report were Gerhard Fryden, Dennis's father, and a man by the name of Mario de Pedro, who had died in the fall along with him.

Gerhard's death was not a double suicide at all. It was an accident.

The woman took a seat at the long sofa, and stared at the butler pouring her tea. The man with the sword chose not to sit, but instead stood behind her like a guard. He, too, stared at the butler as though there was something odd about his movements. The woman stood to greet Dennis, Annelie, and Walt when they arrived, and she and her partner offered hesitant bows—it was clear that neither were used to the customs of the higher-ranking nobility.

Dennis breathed deeply to calm his nerves, and took stock of the woman. The eyes that peeked out from her wavy fringe were blue, and sparkled in a way that made one think of the southern ocean. Her eyebrows were tilted in such a way as to highlight her strength of will, and beneath her shapely nose were lips that gave her a dignified air. She was beautiful, and yet she differed from other southern women in that she lacked the curves that often defined them. There was an asexuality to her, as if you could dress her in male clothing and she would strike you as a beautifully handsome young man. There were a few wrinkles carved into her otherwise smooth skin, and though she looked as if she were in her midthirties, upon asking it turned out she was in fact forty-five.

The man with her was, as it had appeared, in his early thirties.

When Annelie took a seat, Dennis had gone to take up a position behind her until she had pulled him somewhat forcefully to sit by her side. Walt took a seat next to him—both made it clear that they were there as Dennis's support.

The pair then introduced themselves. The woman's name was Isabel, and the man went by Ulrik. Once the butler had poured them all cups of tea, he gave a bow and politely retreated to a position against the wall, just far away enough so as not to overhear the contents of the discussion. He was a trustworthy man, and one who had been with the Lovner family for many long years. Due to the weight of the conversation ahead, he had been given this duty in place of Dennis and Walt. When he stood against the wall he essentially vanished so as not to disturb anyone.

After some hesitation, Isabel began to speak.

"I came here because the Guild requested that I talk to you about the accident. Ulrik is...here as protection."

Ulrik apologized for not removing his weapons, but asked that he be allowed to remain armed. His behavior seemed to indicate that both he and Isabel felt she was in some kind of danger. Neither Dennis nor Annelie intended any such thing, but they could not deny that their visitors were on guard—it indicated that what they were about to speak of was something of considerable weight.

When Annelie had received Shiori's and Alec's letters, she had immediately sent a servant to the Lovner branch of the Adventurers' Guild. The guild master had been shocked at the sudden contact from their once-regular patrons after ten years of silence, but being that he had already heard from the Tris branch not so long ago, he was already prepared for a potential visit. The guild master sent word to the woman who knew most about the accident, and a location was settled upon for a discussion.

The woman who had answered the call and arrived for the discussion was, of course, Isabel. Once an adventurer at the Lovner branch, her southern accent could still be heard in the way she spoke.

"Sir Gerhard perished together with my older brother," she said.

"Your brother? Not your sister?"

"My brother. I confirmed the bodies myself. It was my brother."

"I was also at the scene," said Ulrik. "It was I who took the samples of their hair."

Dennis nodded, but he was still clearly confused, and muttered a thanks to Ulrik for having done so.

So, it was true then—Dennis's father really *had* died in the company of a man, and not a woman as Dennis had believed for so long.

“Mario always got along with Gerhard, and so they worked together. On that fateful day, Mario was with him. Gerhard said he was gathering flowers to give to his wife on their anniversary, and so he and Mario headed to the Abenius mountain range. It is a dangerous place to travel alone.”

“And that was where the accident happened?”

“Yes...”

Isabel lowered her eyes.

“The flower Gerhard was after grows on the mountain’s rocky ledges, in locations just out of reach of prying hands. We know that he was able to reach and pluck one. He had a safety rope, but the anchor point was weaker than they had thought, and the weight on it was too great—it crumbled.”

Isabel’s voice wavered as she spoke, as if she were seeing the old memories all over again. She took a sip of tea and followed it with a few deep breaths, then went on.

“Mario was not connected to the safety rope, but it’s likely he reached out with a hand when he saw what happened. He succeeded in grasping Gerhard’s hand, but...the two of them fell, together.”

Dennis was silent. His breathing was strained, and he continued to stare at Isabel intently. His hands, resting on his knees, gripped them with such strength that his knuckles turned white. Annelie placed a hand upon one of them gently, and Walt placed a hand upon his friend’s shoulder.

“So that’s what *really* happened...” Dennis uttered. “But I was told that my father died in a double suicide with *you*. And you visited our home a few times. This was why I had always believed that *you* were my father’s partner. And that you had tricked him.”

“I visited your home only once,” said Isabel. “I was in sudden need of a dress, and because I was unable to find one quickly, your mother gave me one that she no longer wore. That was the one and only time I visited your home. All the other times, the person you saw was my brother.”

“I...no, but...I was so sure you were the same person,” said Dennis, shaken.

“My brother and I looked very alike. Though you could see the differences from up close, our general impression from a distance was very similar. He was only a year older than me, and our heights and hairstyles were practically identical. You can see for yourself that I...am not particularly womanly in terms of physique, and it was for this reason that we were often told it was difficult to tell us apart from a distance.”

The hint of a wry grin grew to Isabel’s face.

“Gerhard told us that one day he wanted to introduce us to you,

his son. But because of your apprenticeship you were rarely at home. And the times that you were, you often left as soon as you had done what you came home for—the opportunity to introduce us always seemed to slip through your father’s fingers.”

And because Dennis only ever saw Mario and Isabel from a distance, he had come to see them as the same person. The day he had seen Isabel in a dress was the day he had decided that his father’s partner was a woman, and he had gone on believing that mistake for a whole decade.

This meant that part of the problem lay in Dennis’s own assumptions. His blood ran cold.

“But, that means my father...and the double suicide...” he uttered.

“Yes, that...” said Isabel, turning to Ulrik, who nodded.

“We don’t...actually know why the Lovner family and its surrounding nobility would make such a mistake,” said Ulrik, somewhat hesitantly, “but...we do have a lead.”

Dennis’s head shot up in alarm.

“Please bear in mind that this is speculation,” said Ulrik carefully. “After the accident, I was there when we spoke to the Lovner family representative, the baron’s aide, who came to investigate...”

An aide had been sent to investigate on behalf of the baron’s family—the family into which Dennis’s mother had been born. Her father—Dennis and Walt’s grandfather—had been heartbroken to hear of Gerhard’s death, and called for his daughter to return home.

This would have been about six months after Annelie had inherited the duties of the past count, who passed away due to illness. She and those around her were incredibly busy, and though Dennis had heard word that his father had not returned from his expedition, he had felt unable to return home. Annelie had nonetheless urged him to do so, but with his mother in his grandfather’s care, Dennis elected to remain with Annelie—he had believed that his mother would be more at ease in the care of the baron than with someone immature like himself.

“I...I was the one who said it,” admitted Ulrik. “Seeing Gerhard and Mario in the snow with their hands clasped, your father still clutching the flower... I said it looked just like a double suicide...”

“Did you not think such a comment was thoughtless and indecent?” asked Annelie, a slight frown creasing her features.

“It was,” said Ulrik, lowering his head. “It’s just...their hands were clasped so tight. Mario’s other hand was covered in cuts, and we believe these to be from him trying to support his friend as they hung from the cliff. There was no doubt that he did not wish to see Gerhard die, just as Gerhard did not want to die and leave his wife and son alone. They did not want to fall, and that is the reason for the strength

of the grip that remained even after their passing..."

Ulrik covered his face with his hands.

"They were friendly, honest, and trustworthy people," he continued. "So many looked up to them. I was just a rookie at the time, but they were good to me, and they taught me so much—how to prepare for and be efficient in our work, even swordsmanship...but..."

Ulrik's words were shaky. He took a breath before speaking again.

"Gerhard often told me how much he loved his wife. Even on the day of his passing, he talked of how he loved her, and how she was his goddess—even though nobody was listening. He said that the flower he was looking for represented eternal love...but we had heard it all before, so we saw him off with nothing more than playful annoyance. We never imagined that it was a trip he would not return from."

Isabel put a handkerchief to her eyes with a trembling hand.

"By the time the bodies were found, Gerhard's wedding anniversary was long past. But even then he still clung tight to the flower that was his intended gift. It had withered over those days...the stem was broken, and the flower petals were all but gone, and yet he still clasped it tight..."

A silence fell over the room, punctuated by Ulrik's sobs. Eventually, he rubbed at his eyes and lifted his head.

"The reason you all thought it was a double suicide is me, and my thoughtless comment. I can think of no other possibility. I've talked with all my fellow adventurers who were around when it happened, but there's nothing else..."

Dennis fell back into the sofa, even though he knew he shouldn't do so in the company of his lord. But he felt powerless to do otherwise, and he brought a hand up to cover his face. He heard Walt ask him if he was okay, and felt Annelie put a hand to his knee.

Dennis's father had loved his mother. He had betrayed nobody. He had adored his wife until the very end, and had even looked for a rare flower with which to profess his feelings. And it was because of this love, that...

"That means, I..." said Dennis, unable to stop his voice from trembling. "I hated all of them for no reason. For ten years, I..."

Dennis felt himself wrapped in the scent of light peppermint as Annelie's hand gently rubbed his face. He sat there as another silence fell across the room, eventually broken when Annelie spoke.

"But would that alone be enough for us all to believe that it was a double suicide?" she asked. "We're talking about the baron's own aide. It's very hard to believe that there would be some kind of mistake through the lines of communication."

The margravine raised a good point. The baron would have sent someone he could trust implicitly. This was not the kind of thing that

would simply spread through bars like any old rumor.

“We do not know of any of those circumstances,” said Ulrik, “but when I heard that the Lovner family had believed such misinformation for ten years—about people whom I admired and respected—I was intent to get to you as soon as I could.”

“And I also remembered something my brother told me...” said Isabel, picking up after Ulrik. Her voice had lowered, as if she were about to reveal a secret of some kind.

It seemed that now they were finally getting to the heart of the matter.

“I had heard about Gerhard’s son a few times from my brother,” she said. “He told me that Dennis was doing an apprenticeship with the head family and that young Annelie had taken a liking to him and made him her attendant. As she would one day become lord of the family, this meant Dennis would become her aide. But there were many who didn’t think highly of this, and my brother said this worried Gerhard’s wife. None were going to openly assassinate or attack Dennis because it was clear Annelie would never forgive such behavior, but this would not stop detractors from looking for weaknesses and exploiting them.”

And that was, in fact, exactly what had happened. A gaping weakness really had been created—Dennis’s father had apparently abandoned his own wife and child to run off and kill himself with another lover.

“I heard that it was possible that Gerhard’s son was attacked for the way his father died. I wondered—is it possible that someone twisted the story intentionally?”

Dennis, still resting in Annelie’s arms, took shallow breaths. He stared at Isabel and Ulrik. That was exactly what had happened. After his father’s passing, Dennis *had* in fact left Annelie’s side. He had left and taken refuge with his grandfather, where his mother was. Everyone in the baron’s family was deeply saddened. None could have imagined that such an upstanding man would betray his own wife and child, and Dennis’s own grandfather was enraged.

But it was the baron’s aide who had brought back the twisted information. At what point had the story been manipulated? Was it the aide themselves? Or had it been tampered with in the short time before news reached the baron?

The tea had gone cold. The butler quietly removed the cups to prepare another round for everyone. Ulrik watched him as he worked, and spoke.

“After all of that, a different aide came to the Guild, carrying a letter from the margravine. It said that the family would not be using the Guild again until such time that the family had sufficiently

recovered from their mourning.”

Annelie’s brow furrowed. She stared into space as her mind traveled back.

“Yes, I remember sending a letter saying as much,” she said. “But I did not entrust it to any of our aides. I had ordered that it be sent via express delivery.”

Isabel and Ulrik were perplexed. Dennis and Walt, too, shared a stern glance.

“The aide that delivered your letter told us the following,” said Ulrik, still puzzled. “Gerhard’s wife and family are heartbroken by the accident, and request that they be left to mourn on their own. We at the Guild of course agreed—it was a tragedy.”

This request had then cut off communication between the Lovner family and the Lovner Adventurers’ Guild for the next ten years. Though the Guild’s provisions had always included a duty of confidentiality, the Lovner branch was, for its own reasons, especially dedicated.

The Lovner branch of the Adventurers’ Guild was located in a place where many artists gathered—this being a unique characteristic of the domain’s own lords. Because of this, the Guild was often tasked with work related to artistic creations—including many requests to gather or hunt materials and motifs for new pieces. In order to stop details regarding artistic work from leaking before they were officially announced, adventurers were made to be especially careful of keeping confidential with regards to such requests. It was for this reason that the Lovner branch was much less talkative with regards to work and requests compared to other branches. When the Lovner family aide made their request, the Guild took it with the utmost sincerity, and made zero attempts at contact. In this way, ten years passed without a chance for the misinformation regarding Gerhard to be corrected.

“And...it was indeed a tragedy. Dennis was so devastated by it that in the end we opted not to use the Lovner Adventurers’ Guild again,” said Annelie with a sigh.

Dennis had loved his father. Respected him. It brought him joy to see how happy and in love his parents were. And that was why the betrayal had hurt him so badly. He had grown a deep and intense resentment for his father. His heart refused to entertain anything that was even remotely related to the man. Even hearing the name of the Guild that his father and that woman had been members of sickened him. That was the extent to which he had been scarred.

“But I never entrusted that letter to an aide,” said Annelie in a low voice. “And I certainly never asked them to pass that message along. Who in the world was that aide? It must have been someone from this house, no?”

Isabel and Ulrik looked at each other for a moment, then turned their gazes on the same point.

“That aide...” started Isabel.

At that moment, there was a clinking sound followed by a shriek from Walt.

“Ouch! It’s hot!” he cried.

The butler had dropped a teacup, spilling its scalding contents onto Walt’s knee. The butler himself was pale, and his hands were shaking.

“If memory serves,” said Isabel, looking at the trembling butler with the teacup in hand, “*this* is that aide.”

“Theodor...?” asked Dennis, shocked. “Really? Was it you?”

He had been with the Lovner family over two generations, and now stood at the very peak of the manor’s servants. In times where the family was especially busy, he was even entrusted with handling the clerical duties of Dennis and Walt—a clear display of the man’s talent. He had also taken the two under his wing when they were just apprentices, and taught them everything he knew—from preparations to manners and bearing. And it was not just the lords of the family who had earned his trust, but his fellow servants, also.

But Theodor did not answer Dennis’s question. Instead, his elderly hand continued to shake as he held the teacup, and he stared at the tea that had spilled across the table. His silence and his state of being did all the answering for him. Was it really he who had gone to the Lovner branch of the Adventurers’ Guild, ten years ago?

“Theodor, say it isn’t so.”

Annelie’s voice was calm, but there was an authority in her words—she would not allow silence as an answer. Theodor took a moment to compose himself, and then spoke.

“It was I, Lord Annelie,” he said, and after a moment, added quietly, “Do you mind if I clean the mess before I go on?”

His tone was not one of defeat, and not one of despair—it was one of graceful resolve. Annelie nodded, and Theodor went about silently cleaning up the spilled tea. He quickly finished tidying after himself, then stood with his back straight before his lord—his posture made it hard to believe he was nearing his seventies.

“Why would you do such a thing...? You loved and cared for Dennis, did you not?”

“I did,” said Theodor with a nod. “And I do. Very much so.”

Dennis could still remember the day their education came to an end, and Theodor told them they had “graduated.” He told them they had been wonderful students worthy of teaching. He, too, knew that Theodor cared for them.

“Admittedly, I was reluctant to do what I did,” said Theodor.

“However, I received a direct request from a particular individual to whom I was very much indebted, and as such the request was impossible to refuse.”

“Indebted?”

“Yes. I am the son of an art dealer who managed a large gallery. Unfortunately, my father, who inherited the business from my grandfather, lacked a talent for sales, to the point that it was not just the gallery he was forced to sell, but his own house too. We were at our wit’s end, but we were rescued by the one who made that request of me. It was unfortunate that my parents passed away so quickly, but our savior nonetheless employed me as a servant, and taught me the ways of noble education from scratch. He was also kind enough to recommend me to this family—I am here because of him.”

“And so you went to the Guild as per his request, and essentially cut off contact between the Lovner family and the Lovner branch of the Adventurers’ Guild?”

Theodor nodded.

“Yes. I was also given orders to ensure that should any sort of communication arrive, I was to dispose of it in secret. Fortunately, there was no communication from here over the last ten years, but there were a few messages from the Guild over the last two years, which I intercepted and disposed of.”

All of it to ensure that Dennis would never know the truth—that the facts had been twisted, and that Dennis’s father had in fact done nothing worthy of hatred.

All mail for the Lovner family was first delivered to the butler, Theodor. This was so it could be organized according to whom the correspondence was for, but Theodor had abused this position to secretly remove anything that came from the Guild.

“Well, quite the success, wasn’t it?” muttered Annelie in disgust. “We’ll have to write an apology letter.”

“So, that explains why you were so profusely apologetic for my brother’s part in things,” said Isabel, “and the money you sent in the name of apology and funeral costs.”

“Yes. I was aware of how close Gerhard was to his partner, and that the man’s family might try to reach out in some form.”

“So you wanted to nip that in the bud before it became a problem?”

“Yes.”

Annelie kneaded her brow and let out a long sigh.

“I hate to bring up such a horrid topic, but...silencing people was also an option. Just bowing your head and paying people hush money...something about it still leaves a lot of uncertainty.”

“That it does,” said Isabel. “Ten years ago, when I didn’t know

any better, it was enough that I just went along with things. But when I knew that there was some kind of misunderstanding—and a large one at that—I wondered if that kind of ‘silencing’ was in the cards. That was why I dug into the circumstances as much as I could, and had Ulrik join me as protection.”

“The man who requested this of me is not so strong of resolve that he would resort to such cruel methods to see his objectives met. Had murder been a part of his plans, I would not have agreed to take part in them, regardless of my debt of gratitude.”

“But you did kill, nonetheless,” said Annelie, cutting the butler with the intensity of her words. “You sullied the honor of the deceased, and you murdered the hearts of their families. Even now you continue to do so, so you will tell me—what is the name of this murderer?”

Theodor went pale before the fierce judgment of the young margravine, and his eyes dropped to the floor as his lips trembled. A weighty silence fell across the room, and remained until there came a knock at the door.

When Annelie replied, a valet opened the door and announced the arrival of a visitor. The man who entered the room took everyone by surprise except for Theodor, who smiled sadly and offered the man a light bow as a greeting.

“This is the man for whom I worked,” he said. “His Excellency, Baron Vesal Lovner.”

Dennis and Annelie gasped. Walt almost leapt from the sofa in shock.

Vesal was the current lord of the baron’s family—he was Dennis and Walt’s grandfather. He walked into the room slowly, aided by both his cane and a servant, and greeted everyone with a gentle smile.

“I received word from Theodor,” he said. “I came here expecting the truth to have come to light.”

“Grandfather! You... What in the—”

Walt tried storming over to the old man but Annelie held him back. He let out a frustrated sigh and sat down angrily. Though old and limited in terms of mobility, Vesal gave a graceful bow to everyone gathered before he was slowly taken to a seat.

“I always knew that this day would come,” he said, “and yet it took much longer than I ever expected.”

In his words were a biting criticism, but also the defeated attitude of one ready to be judged—or rather, the relief that comes when a great weight is lifted from one’s shoulders. It thus had the effect of making those who were shocked and hurt by the revelation even more angry.

“Why would you do such a thing?” asked Walt, squeezing the

words out.

His usual cheer was replaced with distress, and the color had drained from his face. To think that the person responsible for the ordeal his friend and cousin went through was none other than their own grandfather. It was all he could do to control the hatred and spite that welled within him.

“I did it for you, Walt...”

Walt was shaken. He could not grasp the meaning of Vesal’s words.

“For me? Explain yourself.”

Vesal stared at Walt. Dennis gasped at the sight—Vesal was stern as the lord of the family, but kind as a grandfather, and Dennis saw in his forget-me-not eyes a kind of silent, tranquil madness.

“You are the next in line after Dennis. With him gone, his place would be yours.”

“I don’t believe this! For *me*?! I never wanted that! Is that what you have to do?! Twist and bend the truth?!”

Walt was enraged, and stood to grab the old man by his collar but was held back by those around him. Still, this did not stop him from sharing the anger that remained on his mind.

“Dennis is your grandson! Do you have any idea what you put him through?!”

Walt then sunk back into the sofa and covered his face with his hands.

“You are too generous...” muttered Vesal. His lips curled into a grin, casting deep wrinkles across his face as he chuckled. “Yes, Dennis is my grandson. However, his mother is but one of the common people, and in him is the blood of an Imperial, his father. Compared with him, it is *you* who is most fitting as Annelie’s partner—you who have the rightful blood of the royal nobility, and an official place in the baron’s family register.”

Walt was shocked into silence.

“Grandfather,” said Dennis, his voice shaking. “Is that how much you hated me? When you doted on me, when you cared for me...was all of that an act?”

He remembered the bright smile on his grandfather’s face, calling him over when he was but a boy. He remembered running to the man and being lifted high above and told he was adorable. But did Vesal actually hate him? Was he really willing to sully Gerhard’s reputation, and let his own daughter waste away and die...just to keep Dennis away from Annelie?

“I do not hate you,” said Vesal with a smile. “You are my beloved grandson. Gerhard was a wonderful man. The only issue is the loathsome Imperial blood that flows through your veins. And that

blood cannot be allowed to mix with the main family line. I am aware that the family does not question one's status or identity, but even then, Annelie's partner must be one of the correct bloodline."

But that wasn't all. The rank of the baron's family would be boosted by strengthening its link to the margravine's own.

"And that was why you bent the truth through the family messenger after the passing of my father?"

Vesal had taken Ulrik's words—double suicide—and spoken them as if they were a reality. There were of course those who doubted it, but bad news always spreads faster than good, and as the rumor rippled through social circles, it became the truth for those who heard it.

Dennis, of course, was no different. Upon hearing the "truth" from his grandfather, he had at first doubted the claims. He knew how close his own parents were. But when the rumor was whispered at his own father's funeral—spread by the baron's servants—and nobody corrected it, he also came to believe that it was, in fact, true.

"Taking my mother into your care...that was just another way for you to stop outside contact with her, wasn't it?"

"It was."

The decision to have Gerhard—an immigrant—buried at the Lovner private grave instead of a public ceremony was also a strategic one, as doing so kept his fellow adventurers from attending the service. The same was true of Vesal calling the distraught Dennis to his own home and recommending he take a post somewhere far away in order to avoid shaming the family—Vesal aimed to put him far out of Annelie's reach.

But it was all lies. Dennis had always thought his grandfather cared for him and loved him, but in truth those feelings never really existed.

Dennis knew that there were still many with their heads stuck in the past—people who put immense weight on bloodlines and family prosperity—but he had never believed that his grandfather was among them. After all, the man had allowed his own daughter to forsake her position to marry a man of Imperial blood. But the reality was different. He had relented to Dennis's mother's wishes, accepted her husband, and cared for his grandson, but in his heart he had always kept them at an arm's length. Had he always thought of them as carriers of loathsome Imperial blood?

Dennis put a hand to his chest. He felt the cries of his own heart as it was crushed under the reveal of all-too-heavy realities.

"Do not be mistaken," said Vesal. "I do not hate your mother, nor the man who stole her heart, nor you who inherited his blood. The three of you are all part of my family. I adored all of you, but I had to

do what was best for the Lovner family.”

“Was that really everything?”

Walt’s voice was low. There was a stern look on his face so different from his usual pleasant demeanor.

“If so, why watch in silence these last ten years? If your actions were truly for the Lovner family, you wouldn’t have left things like this for ten years. There had to have been a more resolute, more final, way to get what you wanted.”

“I...”

Vesal dropped into silence, suddenly at a loss for words. His face was pale as Walt looked at him through narrowed eyes.

“Did it have something to do with the spite you always felt for Dennis?”

“Spite? Then is it true that you hate Dennis?”

Vesal did not answer the margravine’s question. A long silence filled the room—that was Vesal’s answer.

“Spite,” he uttered finally, as if resigning himself to the word with an unbearably pained smile. “Spite. Was that what you saw in my face?”

“I saw a hint of it. You looked at Dennis with something in your eyes that you never, ever showed me. Only now do I realize what that was—it was spite.”

Vesal nodded, accepting the words, but he felt suddenly very distant. The man had cared for Dennis but he had also hated his grandson, even if he himself was not aware of it.

“Is it true, grandfather?” asked Dennis. “Is it because of my Imperial blood?”

“No,” said Vesal, shaking his head. “In truth the Empire means nothing to me. And it was not my wish that you disappear either. You are my beloved grandson. But...I envied you. From the very bottom of my heart, I envied the fact that you could so easily take that which I had given up on.”

Vesal was a portrait of mediocrity. He was by no means incompetent, but he had no particular talents for governance or art, and so it was all he could do just to follow the already-beaten path of domain management. He was fortunate to now be loved by his own people as a trustworthy lord, but there were many who’d belittled him for having the family name but none of its leadership or direction.

“Even one as mediocre as myself once felt the flames of a passionate romance. I was in love with a girl with tanned skin, sparkling white teeth, and the most beautiful smile.”

She was a girl with a roaming family that made their living by traveling the lands and performing songs and dances.

“I had to give that romance up for the sake of the family, but I

sometimes wondered what might have happened if I were born just a little later...or no, if this age had come just a touch earlier. Perhaps I might have lived a life together with that love of mine.”

It was a day long past, and a story of love and loss. In Vesal’s words were the echo of all the envy and sorrow that he still harbored. Confronted with the mess of feelings twisted at the bottom of his grandfather’s heart, Dennis was taken aback.

“So you...you were jealous of us. Of my mother...of me...”

Vesal was jealous of his daughter for throwing away her noble rank in a heartbeat to be with the man she loved. And then to see his own grandson build a name through hard work and reach for a love that went beyond status and bloodlines was all too much. Though as a parent and grandparent he loved them for surpassing him, still in his heart slept a fierce jealousy.

“Perhaps some part of you really did do this for Walt, and for the family. But that was just your excuse to drag my mother and me to a position beneath you.”

At a turning point in his life, Vesal had given up on the woman he loved most. Then, as he neared the end of his life, the mixed feelings of love and hate in his heart became too much, and that was when Gerhard had fallen to his death.

Vesal had used the words that Ulrik had spoken so thoughtlessly. He had made his own son-in-law’s death appear as a double suicide, schemed to remove his commoner grandson from his position, and attempted to put his “pureblood” grandson in his place. Doing so would raise the position of the baron’s family, and satisfy his own misshapen pride.

But due to his own mediocrity, and his love for his daughter and grandson, he could take no more drastic measures or form any other plans, and his plot went forth in its own haphazard manner. And whether for better or for worse, the coincidences piled up, and a plot so filled with holes that it should have sunk instead endured for some ten years.

Dennis ignored the pain in his heart and looked at his grandfather. He had aged much over the last ten years. The wrinkles in his cheeks had deepened, and his eyes had sunken further into his face and dulled. His once-straight back now threatened to bend him forward the moment he relaxed his posture. Ten long years of never knowing when his crimes would come to light—years that had scratched away at his life. He did not have much longer left in him.

It was at this point that Annelie, who had been watching silently, chose to speak.

“You are an embarrassment. The one who chose family over love was *you*. If it was so bad that you would choose to regret it for

decades, you should have settled your resolve and seen it through to its end. It is not the fault of the times that you did not choose love. It is not the fault of the times that you lacked the courage to choose both love *and* family. It was your own weakness.”

Her words carried no regard for the man.

“You claim that in your youth it was a world that lacked today’s freedoms, but others chose courage. My great-grandmother chose to be with the very definition of a commoner—a man with zero connections. And even generations back, Lisbet made a wandering artist her husband. More than one hundred and fifty years ago, in an age that can truly be called old.”

Vesal lowered his gaze.

“You are, of course, right...” he said. “I have no retort.”

The old man stared straight ahead, accepting the gaze from his two grandsons and the margravine.

“It is true what you say,” he admitted. “It is all the doing of my weakness and my foolishness. I will accept any punishment. But...what of you two? Can you maintain your positions, knowing what you now know?”

Their own blood relative had conspired to force change in their lord’s ranks. Gone was the madness Dennis had seen in Vesal’s eyes—now he merely wanted to know the will of his two grandsons. The man was asking them if, as relatives of this conspirator, they could still serve at Annelie’s side.

Walt had kept his eyes low, but now looked up at Annelie.

“I will remove myself as your assistant to make way for a successor. I will do anything that is required as punishment, even if it means going under house arrest.”

Though it was true that Walt knew nothing of it, his own grandfather was the lead conspirator in this scheme. And now that he did know, he was a part of it, whether he liked it or not.

“If house arrest is not enough, I am prepared to pay the price with my own life,” he stated.

Everyone was shocked. The always joyful Walt had an unshakable resolve in his eyes, and all knew that he was deadly serious.

“I...” started Dennis.

He looked Walt in the eyes. Walt was his brother-in-arms, and they had supported Annelie since they were both young. Then he looked at Annelie, his lord and the woman he loved and revered. Her gaze was strong, and it did not leave his own.

“I will support Annelie for the rest of my life,” he said. “I decided it before, and I will not be shaken now.”

He would not leave her side, no matter what. He was wracked by the truth of his grandfather’s betrayal, but they would overcome it,

just as they would face and overcome any trial that stood before them.

“Understood,” said Annelie. “Vesal Lovner. I order you to make the truth of this matter known immediately. However, you will do this in a way that will not sully the names of the adventurers that were involved, nor your two grandsons.”

“As you wish.”

“And as for you, Walt Lovner. I will not allow house arrest nor suicide. I hereby order you to pledge a lifetime of loyalty, complete your duties as my assistant, and get happily married.”

“I... What?!”

Walt’s reply was interrupted by his own shrill cry of surprise. He was taken completely off guard by the order, and the serious air of the room lightened a touch, filling with an awkward embarrassment.

“Walt...” muttered Dennis.

“Well, I mean...did *you* see that coming?!”

He’d expected abandonment, not an order to get married! His face scrunched up in shame, but Annelie smiled at him.

“Even if you continued as my assistant, I had a feeling that, knowing you, you’d have refused marriage and put your own responsibilities first. I just played my hand before you did.”

“Gah... You saw right through me,” said Walt with an embarrassed grin. Then he stood up straight and dropped into a deep bow. “As you wish, my lord.”

Annelie gave him a satisfied nod and then looked at Dennis.

“Dennis...”

“Yes, Annelie.”

“You said you would support me for the rest of my life, and...that made me beyond happy. Thank you, Dennis. I want you to walk this path with me, as my husband, for as long as we live. Abandoning me will not be forgiven.”

It was a marriage proposal with an edge of intimidation, and Dennis could do nothing but smile. There was still pain in his heart, but he would not lose to it anymore. There were no enemies left, save for his own weaknesses. That was what he had to defeat, and he would endeavor to do so.

“As you wish,” he said. “My love, and my lord.”



One week later, a letter of apology was sent out to all parties affected by the grave error regarding the truth of Gerhard Fryden's passing. The contents of the letter, which were made public by order of Baron Vesal Lovner, drew much speculation. Questions arose as to whether the baron was truly capable of an error the likes of which would sully the names of both his son-in-law and his grandson. Others whispered that perhaps it was a conspiracy concocted by one with power over the baron. The truth of the matter, as it were, never came to light.

Regardless, Gerhard Fryden's honor was restored, and the baron, upon passing his title on to his son, passed away before the end of the year. Soon afterwards, it was said that the butler of the main Lovner family retired, citing old age.

At the Lovner family cemetery, a brand new grave was erected, some distance from one that had been erected some ten years ago. The gravestone was for a guilty, pitiful man, and as the snow piled up his grave was blanketed in pure white—as if covering over the man's sins.

Chapter 2: Vows in White

1

People brought all sorts of requests to the Guild, and these requests were gathered together at the bulletin board. Shiori was looking the board over in search of something she could complete in a day trip when a voice called out from behind her.

“Must be lonely without Master Alec around today, no?”

The voice had a unique drawl. Shiori turned and was unsurprised to find Linus at a table, seeing to his bow. He gave Shiori a wave as they made eye contact.

Alec and Shiori were working apart that day, and Alec had already gone out on a difficult request together with Clemens. If everything went smoothly, he would be back before the end of the day, but it had been a long time since they’d been apart. Shiori couldn’t help feeling like something was missing in the empty space to her right.

“You’re right,” she said. “I am a bit lonely.”

Linus’s eyes went wide at her honest reply, and Rurii—who was rummaging around behind the shelves—froze in place.

“Something wrong?” asked Shiori.

Linus scratched lightly at the freckles on his cheek, suddenly a little sheepish.

“I’m just surprised, to be honest. Expected you to dodge the question, you know? Until recently if I’d asked the same thing, you’d have said something like, ‘No, no, I’m quite fine thank you.’ I guess what I’m saying is...you’ve changed.”

Linus was all smiles—all he wanted to tell her was that she was now more open about her feelings than she used to be.

“Oh, really? You think so...?”

When she thought about it, however, Shiori realized that it had become second nature to hide her feelings when she was tired or lonely—she’d been deceiving herself for quite some time.

“I guess that just shows how much you were stretching yourself thin,” said Linus. “But it’s a good thing—it’s like you’re just comfortable being yourself now.”

He ran a finger along the string of his bow and gave a satisfied nod. Shiori smiled back. She had people around her who accepted her for who she was, and a man in her life who loved her dearly. With

these people around her—and more importantly, with her realizing that they were there in the first place—she no longer felt the need to deceive herself. She could simply be who she was.

“I suppose so,” she said. “I feel like so much has gotten...easier and lighter recently. I think the reason I feel this way, and the reason I can be this way, is thanks to everyone’s help.”

It was truly, honestly, how she felt, and yet this time she was met by a more complicated expression—Linus’s eyebrows drooped into something strained and awkward, but which eventually gave way to a smile.

“No...” he said. “We didn’t do anything worthy of that kind of praise. We just...”

But for whatever reason, he did not go on.

“What is it?” Shiori asked.

“No, it’s nothing. I’m just glad you can be who you are, that’s all.”

Shiori had the sneaking suspicion that Linus was dodging the question. All the same, his simple smile showed her that he really did mean what he said, and so she nodded and smiled back.

“Shiori!” came a voice from the counter—it was Zack. “Apologies, but can you help me with something? It’s an urgent request that just came in.”

“Go get ’em!” said Linus.

Shiori nodded in reply and went off to the counter.

Once Linus was done mending and looking after his bow, he put it away and watched as Shiori and Zack began discussing the request. Shiori looked carefully at the request ticket and scribbled something into her notebook. Zack must have followed up with a joke, because she laughed happily at whatever he’d said. It was a simple, pure smile, and it carried no burdensome feelings. Rather, it brought a relaxed smile to Linus’s own face.

“Oh, what’s this? Someone looks happy...? Or is it perhaps something a little different?”

With a wave of her smooth, golden hair, Ellen peeked at Linus’s face, then followed his gaze to Shiori. At the sight of her, the same kind of smile rose to Ellen’s own features—one that was happy, yes, but with the hint of an ache at its edges.

“Oh... Hey, Dr. Ellen.”

“She really smiles from the heart now, doesn’t she?” remarked Ellen.

“Yep. That she does.”

The two adventurers watched the smiling housekeeping mage for a time.

Shiori had started life in Storydia with literally nothing—she had

not a single coin to her name and spoke not a single word of the local language. She had built everything she now had with blood, sweat, and tears.

It could indeed be said that this was because a kind man had taken her in, and kind people had taken care of her, but it was her efforts that were the linchpin. Her rank, her friends, her companions, and the man she loved—she would have none of them had she not worked as hard as she did.

Tris was a place where many immigrants made their living, and it was a place where many different cultures were welcomed. The Tris Adventurers' Guild was, similarly, full of especially decent people, and considered a good working environment. But it was not so generous that it accepted everyone with open arms. Had Shiori been half-hearted in her efforts, and had she given up to choose the easier path or been arrogant of her achievements, there would not have been so many who looked out for her.

That she stood where she now was, and that so many adored her, was a testament to her strength and resolve.

“You know what she told me? She said it’s because of us that she can smile like that, and that she feels like a weight’s been taken off her shoulders. But all we did was watch over her. We didn’t...” Linus trailed off, at which point Ellen’s beautiful eyebrows drooped sadly.

“We all noticed that something wasn’t right, but none of us could save her,” she said.

These days, saying this felt like an excuse. But at the time, each detail had felt like such a trifling thing, barely worth mentioning. Shiori’s assessment results had always been bad even though she tried her best. Her party companions had grown harsher. Her equipment alone had been shabby, and she alone had been consistently missing from their party celebrations. She’d stopped smiling as often...and then stopped coming to the Guild entirely.

Everyone had sensed *something*. But that feeling was so slight as to come off as inconsequential. It was common enough for people to put in effort and not have it pay off, and for their share of the rewards to decrease. Consequently, relationships often soured as a result, and people did end up distancing themselves from the Guild. This was especially common for those of lower ranks.

The members of Akatsuki had all been friendly, good people. Some had told Shiori as much when she was worried about joining a fixed party, giving her the final push into what would end up being a horrific ordeal.

And so they had all failed to notice what was happening, even as they held tiny slivers of doubt in the corners of their hearts. They had all sensed *something*, and yet it was not enough to stop what happened

before it could start. This was why the incident had cast a dark shadow over all of them—not just the victim, Shiori herself, but all those who were around her while it was going on.

Since the Akatsuki incident, everyone had become a little more aware of relationships within the Guild's parties. This was particularly true when it came to fixed parties, where the inner workings of a group were harder to discern from the outside—especially so when out on expeditions. Everyone paid more attention to the nature of parties when they interacted. So as to prevent unfair treatment, the Guild revised its assessment system, and instituted periodic discussions between the adventurers and its staff.

It had been several decades since the creation of the Adventurers' Guild. Over that time, the number of adventurers had increased, and the relationships between them had become more complicated—the systems had grown unable to accommodate them all, and so parts of it had to be revised and improved. Many of these problem areas—for which improvement had been put off for some time—were beginning to see change since the Akatsuki incident.

Though she had never wanted any of it to happen, and it left her with mixed feelings, these revisions to the management of the Adventurers' Guild had already helped to catch and put a stop to some problems before they had a chance to take root.

And as for how Shiori herself fared afterwards...

"She's strong, all right..." said Linus.

Shiori had never blamed anyone. Even as she grappled with the wounds that scarred her heart, she had returned to the Guild.

"That she is. But some part of her is still very fragile, nonetheless. If she had kept going, and kept pushing herself, she would have shattered. That's why I'm glad someone strong and trustworthy came along that she could put her trust in."

They all felt like they owed Shiori, and so they had treated her like glass. In turn, Shiori stopped opening up so as not to worry anyone. A wall had gone up in her heart after the Akatsuki incident—thin and yet unbreakable—and now, it had finally come down.

"I just want her to be happy," said Linus.

Having finished her planning with Zack, Shiori nodded at Linus and Ellen, and was out the door as they waved goodbye.

"And she will be," said Ellen with a smile, certain of the words she spoke. "Her hard work will pay off."

Shiori laughed as she watched the cheerful Rurii bouncing around her feet as they walked, and she waved to acquaintances as she headed out the door. She looked up at the sky—the light blue hue of it was unique to winter, and it seemed to stretch on endlessly as rays of

gentle sunlight fell around them.

“So much to treasure...”

She had her cheerful and adorable friend, her strong and ever reliable brother, her kind and protective companions, her friendly coworkers, her bold and fun new friends, and...

Shiori took a piece of folder paper from her notebook and opened it up. It was a picture that Annelie had drawn and given to her. A picture of a dashing, dignified Alec, his magic sword at the ready, and a sharp light in his gaze.

Shiori giggled.

“He’s so cool...”

She loved him.

“*Daisuki.*”

He was so important to her now, his existence irreplaceable. He was a precious treasure she had found in this world.

As she giggled happily, a gift he had given her sparkled on her left wrist—a delicate bracelet with a beautiful magenta stone. The color made her think of his eyes, and she smiled as she heard a voice call out from behind her. She turned to see Nadia running towards her. The mage took a few deep breaths when she finally caught up to Shiori to compose herself.

“I’m so glad I caught you,” she said. “Zack wanted me to give this to you—it arrived just as you left.”

The wax seal on the letter was a family seal—that of a harp-carrying maiden and a bird of passage. The sender was none other than Annelie Lovner, and the wax seal was her family crest.

“Annie?”

Shiori thanked Nadia for the letter and watched as the mage quickly returned to the Guild. Then she stopped under the eaves of a restaurant and opened the envelope. The letter was written in a beautifully elegant script, and after its introductory greetings, it went on to thank Shiori and Alec for their help in solving the case that had followed them for so long.

“Oh, I’m so glad it all worked out.”

The details were sparse, and the letter promised more detail the next time they met in person. Still, the important news was there—the truth had come to light, and the honor of Dennis and his father had been restored. This removed one obstacle that could have gotten in the way of Annelie and Dennis’s marriage.

“Let’s hope everything goes smoothly.”

Shiori wasn’t speaking to anyone in particular outside of herself as she went on reading the letter, but her eyes went wide as the letter came to its conclusion. A sudden business discussion had come up, and Annelie was coming to Tris that very month. She wanted very

much to meet for dinner during her stay.

Shiori felt panic as she read the words, hoping that she wouldn't be busy on the date. Though she was of course overjoyed at the chance to reunite with her friend so soon, there was one problem.

"I don't...have a dress..."

The restaurant Annelie wanted to meet at was Snow Violet Manor, located in the Second District. And there was no doubt that it was the kind of high-class restaurant with a very particular dress code.

2

Snow Violet Manor was a luxurious restaurant located by the park in the Second District. Its garden was gracefully adorned with potted snow violets in full bloom, offering a marvelous contrast with the falling snow. A horse-drawn carriage trotted along a small path through the garden, and came to a silent stop before the building.

A uniformed doorman opened the carriage door, and greeted its passengers with an elegant bow. Alec responded with a nod and alighted first, reaching a hand out for Shiori, then laughing when he noticed how nervous she still was.

"No need to be so uptight," he said. "This isn't the kind of place where they're ultra strict about rank and etiquette. You'll be fine."

"Ooh... All the same..." muttered Shiori, taking his hand and smiling awkwardly as she stepped out of the carriage.

She couldn't help but feel a bit lost in front of the building, which was clearly designed with the upper classes in mind.

"Relax, Shiori," said Nadia, showing all the grace of a noble herself. "We're right here with you. And I highly doubt you'll leave a bad impression on the margravine."

The mage smiled as she was accompanied by Clemens, who looked even more graceful and beautiful than usual.

"It is exactly as your fellow guests have said," explained the doorman politely. "Though in appearance the restaurant is a luxurious upper-class experience, we do not place too much importance on matters of etiquette. You'll have a separate room away from other diners, so please, do try to relax and enjoy yourself."

The doorman must have noticed she was an immigrant and hoped to quell her nerves—he was polite, of course, but he spoke in a manner that was not overly deferential so as to put her at ease.

"Thank you ever so much," replied Shiori with a smile.

The doorman smiled, and Shiori felt some of the tension in her shoulders ease.

If only that were the only thing I was worried about...

The doorman urged them inside and, escorted by Alec, Shiori

stepped into Snow Violet Manor. There, a footman took their coats with a casual ease and saw them to the reception.

Shiori looked up at Alec through the just-right lighting—not too bright, not too dark. She had been overwhelmed by the figures of Nadia and Clemens—who held themselves with the dignified manner of high-class nobles—but she was dizzied by the sheer charm that exuded from her lover, standing by her side.

His bangs, which usually hung over his forehead and eyes, were combed back, and he wore a tailor-made three-piece suit in a currently popular, casual fashion. He looked every bit the portrait of a noble about to enjoy an easygoing night on the town. At the same time, he made no attempt to hide his rugged nature, and it added an edge of dangerous sensuality to him, which drifted from his elegant stature.

It wasn't exactly a playboy image, but the aura was one of a man with a wealth of experience in a very particular kind of fun and games. The look fit him like a glove. Were he to wander out into the nightlife of Storydia, there was no doubt that many women would be drawn to him—the types that liked to flirt with danger.

Alec's face eased into a smile as he noticed her eyes on him, and though it was something she'd grown very used to, here it made her heart race.

He's always been handsome, but it's so blinding I can barely look him in the eyes.

In fact, she'd felt almost unable to remain composed around him in his formal attire—such was the manliness he exuded. If he got up to any of the “mischief” that he sometimes sprang on her in private, she felt like she'd go completely weak at the knees.

(Unbeknownst to Shiori, however—and she had no way of knowing this—Alec felt almost exactly the same way with her so dazzlingly dressed by his side.)

“Sir Alec Dia and Miss Shiori Izumi, Sir Clemens Theydon and Miss Nadia Felice, and Rurii Esquire. The Lovners have yet to arrive—would you like to wait for them at your room?”

“Yes, please. We'd prefer to be out of sight of prying eyes.”

“Understood. Right this way, please.”

The politeness of the customer service shocked Shiori—the manager did not hesitate in the slightest to give even Rurii a title. They were shown to a room at the back of the restaurant with two sections—a sitting room and a dining room. Both areas were elegantly prepared and comfortable to be in, and the servers at hand had prepared tea and sweets for the five of them. Once the servers had disappeared behind the partition at the back of their room, Shiori let out a sigh of relief and fell back onto the long sofa.

“Still nervous, huh?” asked Alec.

“Yes,” said Shiori with a smile. “I know what the doorman said, but...I feel a little on edge when I’m somewhere meant for the likes of nobles.”

“That’s natural. But you know, this place is flexible—they do their best to match their service to the homes of their guests. Not quite so far as eastern cuisine, unfortunately, but they’re more than happy to accommodate the southern style of eating with your hands, for example. That’s because the restaurant is often used for hosting foreign guests.”

“Wow... I had no idea.”

Shiori felt that eating with your hands might be looked down upon anywhere but here.

Meanwhile, Rurii continued to happily munch away at the snacks that had been put out for it—specially baked sweets for familiars, courtesy of Enander Trading Company. Shiori did not know if they were always on hand or especially acquired for this dinner, but it was nice to see they had even considered the slime—the hospitality at Snow Violet Manor was not to be taken lightly.

“The front garden and hedges have also been designed with privacy in mind—there’s no need to worry about people seeing you as you enter the restaurant,” said Nadia. “And of course the privacy of each room is respected, making it perfect for intimate dinners and discussions. Some of the Guild’s adventurers even use it for meetings.”

“Ah, that might explain why Annie picked this restaurant.”

Annelie Lovner was a woman Shiori had met a few weeks ago as part of a request. She’d come to Tris on urgent business talks and requested they meet at this particular restaurant.

She was incredibly busy—there was the wedding with Dennis, there were family matters, and there was much that needed settling at the end of year—and though she had arrived just yesterday, she was already scheduled to return home tomorrow. She didn’t have much free time, but she hoped to meet Shiori if their schedules matched up.

“But I must say...the dress really suits you.”

There was a certain heated passion to Alec’s voice as he changed the subject. He moved in closer to Shiori on the sofa, and put his fingers to the nape of her neck, which was bare on account of her hair being up.

“That Nadia sure knows her stuff,” he said. “It’s a beautiful, elegant design that brings out all of your charm.”

His low voice seemed to grow even more heated, and his fingers went from the nape of her neck to her shoulders, then dropped suggestively to her shoulder blades, sending a shiver through Shiori’s body.

“A-Alec...” she muttered.

What was he doing?! Did he not know they were in front of friends?!

The neckline of her dress went from her shoulders and dipped just enough to tease a hint of the valley of her breasts. It might have been considered especially racy if not for the elegant lace at the edge of her neckline and the pearl necklace sparkling at her neck. The dress at once hinted at the gentle, hidden flesh of her chest but maintained the perfect balance of grace and sensuality.

Because Shiori didn't own any formal dresses of her own, Nadia had borrowed one from a dressmaker friend. Since Shiori was noticeably smaller in stature compared to Storydian women, her dress had been picked from a selection of those for unmarried young girls. The most mature of the lot was selected and quickly tailored for her, and Shiori felt fortunate that the fit felt entirely natural.

That said, she was somewhat uncomfortable with just how suggestive it was, though this was and had been the fashion for the last few years. She was happy so long as it looked good on her. However...

I never imagined he'd tease me in a place like this!

Out of sight of their three companions—the two humans and a slime—Alec's fingers were tracing the line of her back in a most suspicious manner. It was beginning to make her hot under the collar, and when she looked up at him, he smiled playfully back down at her.

“Don't toy with me! Stop teasing me!” she whispered.

“But the way you react, it's just so adorable...”

Shiori groaned.

“Alec. You might think you're playing coy, but we all know what you're up to.”

This time, Alec was the one who groaned.

Alec's reply and Clemens's follow-up—being the subject of both of them made Shiori want to disappear. In an effort to cool her flushed cheeks before Annelie's arrival, Shiori sent some cold air through her fingers and fanned her face.

All the while, Rurii continued to eat its snacks and sip at its tea, occasionally pausing to watch its two friends on the sofa. Shiori couldn't be entirely certain that this was happening, but she got the suspicious feeling that it was watching their mischief like a show to go with its snacks. It was a slime with rather...interesting...hobbies.

Rurii was Shiori's familiar and her friend. But more recently, it had been taking Alec's side and pretending not to notice when he got up to mischief. Rurii might have had reasons for doing what it did, but Shiori had absolutely no way of knowing what they were.

At that moment, they heard movement from behind the closed

doors into their room, and then there was a gentle knock—Annelie had arrived. Everyone stood to welcome her, and even Rurii finished its tea and snacks and wobbled in anticipation.

The door to the room opened, and Annelie and Dennis entered, led by the restaurant manager.

“I’m so sorry to keep you waiting,” said Annelie with a smile. “I organized this all and yet I left you all waiting. The meeting went on much longer than expected, unfortunately.”

This was not the Annelie Shiori had been used to seeing—gone were her traveling clothes, replaced by a green dress that brought to mind the start of summer. On her ears were earrings that glittered and pulsed with a hint of magical energy—they’d been made from the fire stones she’d received. Upon closer inspection, Dennis’s tiepin, too, also featured a fire stone. Shiori had to wonder if the two of them—or more likely, the three of them including Walt—had had these fire stone accessories made to match.

“Oh, no, please don’t let it bother you. We’re so humbled by your invitation, Annelie...”

Shiori paused under Annelie’s stare. Then she remembered—she was so used to calling Annelie by her full name that she still had trouble breaking the habit.

“Um...but I’m so glad we could meet again so soon, Annie,” said Shiori. “And you too of course, Dennis.”

Annelie burst into a smile.

“As am I, Shiori.”

Unfortunately, Walt had not joined them on this particular trip. With the end of the year fast approaching, the clerical work showed no signs of stopping, and so Walt had had no choice but to stay behind—in fact, it was something he’d insisted upon.

“I must say,” said Alec, looking at the two nobles, “there’s something different about your faces now.”

“Should we take that as a compliment?” asked Dennis.

“Indeed. You both look confident. Determined.”

Annelie and Dennis wore expressions that said they had been freed of a great weight during their journey to Silveria Tower—on top of that, one could see in them the strength of will unique to those with strong resolve.

“I suppose so,” said Annelie with another smile. “Now I know how strong one can be when they’ve made up their minds. But so much happened upon our return from Silveria, and it was because of you that we found the thread that led us to the truth. Today we’d like to show our gratitude.”

Which meant, of course, dinner. Servers ushered them all into the adjoining dining room, pulling their seats back and pouring them all

glasses of a light-colored wine. Everyone held the glasses up while Annelie made a toast.

A most enjoyable dinner began.

After dinner, tea was served and passed around, and everyone sat where they pleased.

Though Shiori had of course been nervous, dinner turned out to be exactly as the doorman had assured her—not at all formal, and in fact rather relaxed from start to finish. It was not the kind of full-course meal where cutlery etiquette came into play, but one where all the food was already prepared and placed on the table, and one only needed to inform a server to have it served. Apparently this had once been the standard way that meals were served in Storydia—full-course meals were a custom of the continents to the southwest, and they were only served here on occasions such as dinner parties or banquets where important people from those countries were guests.

“Oh my...” uttered Shiori, “what do you even call that...?”

This reaction came after Annelie had explained what happened upon their return from Silveria. Shiori couldn’t help but feel for the people involved, and let out a little groan.

“I can’t believe your grandfather would do such a thing,” she went on.

“Indeed,” added Alec, a furrow in his brow. “Nobody would expect their own blood to be behind such a conspiracy.”

That was the reason that Dennis had a hatred of immigrants. And yet it had also been twisted in order to remove him from his position. All the same, the truth of the matter—that his own grandfather had been at the heart of it—was almost too much to bear. For ten years Dennis had detested his own father, who was in fact innocent of blame. This was not to mention that the lies had given those already plotting his downfall further ammunition to criticize him.

“I still can’t understand my grandfather’s feelings of jealousy for me and my mother, and I think perhaps I never will.”

Vesal was a man who did not have the will to fight against societal pressure, and so when his hopes had been lost, they followed him as regrets. These morphed eventually into jealousy at the sight of his daughter and grandson achieving what he had given up on. Concocting a conspiracy to plot their downfall was *not* something that an ordinary person would go about.

“I am sure my grandfather had circumstances of his own to bear. And I don’t doubt that it would have taken considerably more effort back then to stand up to societal pressure. All the same, I refuse to become a man like he was. I refuse to live a life in which I make excuses to deceive my own person. To think of a life where, at its end,

you hurt the ones you love and make them hate you in return... It is so punishingly lonely. So I want to be true to myself, and live with everything I have.”

Dennis did not mind failing if it came as a result of giving it his best. And so he would give life his everything—live a life of no regrets—so he could hold his head high by the time he reached his own end.

“I’m so glad we went to Silveria,” he said. “It gave me the courage to face everything. Had I never changed, I would have ended up not unlike my grandfather.”

“I see...”

It made Shiori happy to think that she could be a part of the journey that shaped the direction of Dennis’s life.

“But if you ask me,” said Annelie, “I think it all came as a result of your hard work, Dennis. Fortune does not favor those who do nothing.”

Annelie had seen his efforts firsthand—she had seen him choose to live instead of run when things were at their worst. And the reason she could go on loving him was because she knew he would not fall to adversity, but instead work through it. And so it was that a chance arrived, brought to him by her own hand.

Dennis was surprised, but hid it behind a bashful chuckle.

“I didn’t think it would ever be seen that way. But I suppose you’re right... I suppose those ten years of struggle weren’t for nothing.”

Annelie’s fingers reached out and touched his hand, and she smiled as their eyes met.

“I must admit, though,” said Annelie, “I never imagined that the clue we needed to solve it all would reach us in such a way.”

Alec had known only the tiniest sliver of Dennis’s past, and yet that was where everything started—when the Tris adventurers had heard the Lovner name and fallen into nostalgia, it was Alec and Clemens who had noticed a discrepancy. And from there, the thread of a truth from ten years past began to unravel.

“It must have been a kind of fate,” said Clemens thoughtfully. “A fate woven between you and the fates of others. The fate that warms and connects the two of you led you to the best possible outcome when you were at your crossroads.”

Alec, who had been quietly listening until then, spoke up.

“It was the same for me,” he said. “Thanks to the journey to Silveria, I made up my mind to once more take stock of my life. As I came to know that you, Dennis, had fought for ten years by Annelie’s side, I realized that I could not keep running away either. Even now, I stand at a crossroads. And it was Shiori who linked me to you, whose fate gave me direction. I will not let the chance you gave me go to

waste.”

Alec reached out to Dennis with his right hand—a handshake in which he offered his preferred hand, and the one that wielded his weapon. It was a sign of trust and respect.

“Thank you,” Alec went on. “It was you, Dennis, who gave me the chance to settle my resolve. And I, too, will hold my head high and live life to the fullest.”

Dennis was momentarily stunned.

“Alec,” he uttered.

But his surprise broke into a smile and he faced the adventurer with a confident gaze and nodded. Then he took Alec’s hand in his own and shook it.

“We will fight,” he said, “so that our lives from here on out are good ones.”

“You got it.”

Shiori and Annelie smiled as they watched their lovers make their pledge. Rurii bounced happily by her feet, while Clemens and Nadia watched on with smiles of their own.

After Alec and Dennis had shaken hands and sat back down, a thought came to Alec’s mind while he sipped at his now lukewarm tea.

“I was wondering about this...” he said, choosing his words carefully. “But things won’t be easy for Walt, will they?”

“Oh, you’re right,” said Shiori. “Will he be okay?”

The thought brought a touch of worry to the edges of their eyebrows.

“To be honest, he’s in a tough spot at present. We saw it coming, but...he *is* the heir to the family behind it all. Many have already made their opinions clear—that I should have him take responsibility like his grandfather, and remove him from my employ.”

“Let’s not forget that I’m related to him too. Some of those same people have said that both Walt *and* I should be expelled. But it feels like too little, too late. I am not particularly worried about it.”

Shiori sighed. It was as she had feared—there were always those who would look to drag you down.

“However,” said Annelie, her face filling with a quiet, confident smile, “this simply means that it is our turn to support Walt. We will help him... We will be right there with him, and together we will protect the Lovner domain.”

“Well put,” said Dennis, nodding. “These last ten years, it’s been him who encouraged and supported me.”

“And he always trusted in and supported my feelings of love. That’s why the two of us... No, the *three* of us, will go on helping each other, just as we always have.”

The three nobles had formed bonds of mutual support and protection the very day they had met. And Shiori had also heard that many supported the margravine's decision—she knew they would all be okay.

“Yes, I'm sure you will,” she said.

“And I made sure to tell Walt that what he's going through is but a trifle of an ordeal compared to what Dennis had to go through. In any case, his head is so full of his daily responsibilities and what to eat that he might not even have time to care.”

“Walt's always going to be Walt, isn't he?”

He was almost certainly putting on a brave front, but even then it was like Shiori could catch a glimpse of Walt's bright smile in their jokes.

“Oh my—look at the time. Regretfully, we should be leaving...”

The time had passed in but an instant, and the clock on the wall let them all know the restaurant was nearing closing hours.

“I'm so glad I got to see you. Thank you so much, Annie,” said Shiori, taking the margravine's hand and squeezing it.

“No, thank you,” said Annelie, squeezing it back. “I'll invite you to the wedding party. You must come.”

The formal wedding ceremony for the nobility and the wedding party were to be separate events. The latter was a party for close friends.

“It would be my pleasure. Oh, I simply can't wait to see you as a bride all dressed up in white!”

Annelie blinked, and Shiori was slightly taken aback by Annelie's confusion at what she thought was just a simple statement.

“White?” asked the margravine. “Why would I wear a white dress?”

“Oh. You won't?”

Shiori had simply assumed that weddings would be the same as in her old world, but she'd been mistaken. In Storydia, the bride and groom dressed in the colors of their lover's eyes or hair for the wedding ceremony. Otherwise, they would dress in the traditional garments of old, complete with the kingdom's embroidery, as per custom. In neither case would the bride or groom wear white.

“Things were different in your country, then,” said Annelie. “Was there a particular meaning to the use of white?”

“Yes. There were different interpretations, one of which meant ‘dye me in your colors.’”

Annelie gasped, her eyes growing wide with surprise and admiration. Alec and Dennis looked at each other, and for whatever reason, blushed. Clemens, too, covered his mouth and looked at the floor while Nadia glared at him.

“Dye me in your colors...”

“Such, er...depth...”

The men clearly had their minds somewhere else entirely, and Shiori watched them as they whispered among themselves.

“Why, that’s simply wonderful,” said Annelie. “It’s like becoming a canvas for you and your lover to paint the rest of your lives upon. Oh, I love it. Don’t you think it’s just perfect?”

“Oh. Oh... Um, yes,” said Dennis, his face still red. “A most suitable color for the Lovner family.”

“Then it’s decided. We’ll dress in white. Thank you, Shiori. Such a wonderful piece of culture you’ve shared with us.”

“Oh, don’t mention it. I’m certain it’ll look wonderful on the both of you.”

Annelie and Dennis would surely draw the same scenery upon their shared canvas. The memories they had built together were the colors with which they would paint, and the finished product was destined to be one both beautiful and warm.

The nobles and adventurers shook hands and said their farewells, and upon promising to see each other again, they entered their carriages and headed for home.

Roughly a year and a half later...

The attire of the bride and groom at the most grand wedding ceremony for the Lovner family lord—pure white for both bride and groom—surprised many of those in attendance. However, the significance of the pure color and its formal attire slowly began to spread as a custom of its own, eventually becoming just another part of the culture in the kingdom of Storydia.

Wearing the same colors came to express the resolve of both bride and groom to carve a path of their own into the future. In this way, couples vowed to set up canvases for themselves, onto which they would carefully and lovingly paint the picture of their lives together.

Wanting to share a few more drinks elsewhere, Clemens and Nadia alighted from the carriage early. This left Shiori and Alec alone, silently gazing at the evening that dyed the snowy townscape blue as the carriage rumbled onwards. Rurii seemed tired, and napped by their feet, trembling softly.

After a time, Alec pulled Shiori close.

“Shiori,” he whispered.

“Hm?” Shiori replied, sinking into Alec’s chest and looking up at him. “What is it?”

Alec’s dark magenta eyes narrowed into a smile. He wrapped one arm around her waist while he took her hand in the other, which he brought to his lips. He kissed the tips of her fingers, and she felt a

fierce warmth.



“Will you wear the same for me, someday...? A dress of pure white?”

“I... Hm?”

His words were so sudden, and as their meaning washed over her, her eyes bulged from their sockets.

“There is still much I have to settle,” he said, “as I am sure there is for you too.”

“Yes...”

“But when all of it is behind us, I will ask you once more—I will ask if you will do me the honor of wearing a dress of pure white.”

“Alec...”

His words were not direct, but she understood their meaning and the heart of them. They represented his intent to live the rest of his life with her.

“Yes,” she said, and her heart filled with so much bliss that it almost hurt. Warm tears rolled down her cheeks. “Yes. I will do my utmost, so that I may reply to you without fear or worry. Let’s work at it together.”

“Indeed.”

A smile passed between them, and their kisses grew deeper and more passionate. Alec’s hands traced the nape of her neck, her back, and then stopped above Shiori’s racing heart. The sweet, gentle, and sensual movements of his hand melted her—both body and soul.

“Alec...”

“Shiori...”

They called out each others’ names with rasping passion, then once more wrapped themselves up in the meeting of their mouths. It was a quiet, fiery expression of love between them, and went on until their carriage came to a stop, while the night in Tris drifted on quietly.

Interlude 1: A Younger Brother's Request

Zack's apartment was furnished with elegant furniture adorned in fabrics of calming colors. It was neat and tidy for a single man's home, and it was comfortable—the reason his friends often visited for drinks.

Zack pointed Alec to a chair, and while Alec brought out the snacks he'd purchased from a food stall, Zack took some of his favorite ale from the shelf and poured it into the glasses on the table. The amber beverages wafted with the unique scent of grains and refreshing fruit.

"Well, here's to a job well done," said Zack. "At least you can take it easy for a while."

"Indeed."

They held up their glasses in a small toast.

It was evening, a few days after Alec and his fellow adventurers had come back from their job for the Lovner family. He'd had something he wanted to discuss with Zack in private, but it wasn't until now that their schedules finally lined up. The end of the year—and especially just before and after the Nativity Festival—was a time with lots of paperwork, sudden requests, and many meetings. By the time Zack got around to finishing up for the day, business hours were usually long over.

"Sorry to trouble you," Alec said. "Especially when you finally clocked out on time today."

"Think nothing of it. I don't have much else to do besides read and eat. I'm glad for the chance to share a few drinks."

Zack matched Alec's kindness with his own, then watched as his friend drank some ale. They spread out the food between them and talked while they ate.

"You've changed a bit," said Zack.

He'd been watching his friend for a time.

"Changed? How so?"

"It's your aura, I guess. You seem more relaxed."

"Really? It's not intentional, I can tell you that," said Alec, tilting his head quizzically.

"That's *exactly* what I'm talking about," said Zack. "That expression. Well, your expressions in general. That's it, actually—you're more...expressive."

Alec had always been someone whose expressions were clear and easy to read. This was especially true when it came to anger and displeasure—his other feelings were somewhat stilted and clunky around the edges. He was also never one to let the smaller emotions show, and so people who didn't know him well often thought he was cold and aloof.

But now Alec was different. When he was happy, his face eased into a natural smile, and when something was funny he laughed. His eyebrows drooped when he was sad. It was like the gentler parts of his heart had come to the surface.

"Well, if I *have* changed...then it's thanks to Shiori."

And as he spoke these words, Alec broke into a gentle smile.

As he grew closer to the woman he wanted in his life—the woman he wanted to protect—he had at some point been healed himself. The feelings in him that had been pushed away and frozen into a hard lump had melted and been freed by Shiori's gentle warmth and kindness.

Alec, too, carried scars. There was what happened with his father and with his younger brother, and even now he was tormented by the words that had been spoken by the one person he thought would understand him.

You are completely, utterly worthless.

Zack still remembered the fierce rage that had gripped him when Alec had first told him the tale. That girl, of all people, knew how close Alec was to breaking, and how much it took him just to keep it together after all the ridicule he received for being an illegitimate son of low upbringing. And yet even knowing all this, she spoke the words that were like a nail in the coffin of Alec's heart.

That said, I do understand the rage she must have felt at expecting marriage, only to have the rug pulled out from under her feet...

He knew that she had been a kind, prudent woman.

Still, the position of crown princess was not an easy one. And in the case of emergencies, it was the crown princess who governed in place of her husband. A woman who simply stood by the prince's side would not be enough.

At that time, it was not just the royal family that was under siege. In just a few short years, the reports of deaths—seemingly one after the other—sent the government into disarray, and the kingdom into an economic downturn. The long stable and prosperous kingdom had been delivered into political instability, and several countries saw this as a chance to take covert action.

What the nation needed was people who could stand up to and respond to this national crisis. This was true even of those who would become a part of the royal family through marriage.

The types of women who just sit and wait will not be made princesses or queens. That was especially true of anyone who could not see or understand the situation the nation was in at the time.

And so, she had lashed out.

The wounds Alec bore—inflicted when he was still so young and sensitive—refused to heal, and instead pulsed at the bottom of Alec's heart, occasionally opening anew as if to torment him. Zack knew—as did Clemens, as did all those closest to Alec—that it was not a wound any of them could mend.

In that sense, perhaps the way he was drawn to Shiori was inevitable.

The wounds that Alec and Shiori carried in their hearts stemmed from the same core feeling—emptiness. Perhaps the two of them had walked similar paths. Both had lost the place they thought of as safe—as home—and both had felt their own existences denied and forsaken. Perhaps it was this similar pain that had drawn them to one another.

Both of them had suffered, and yet both strove to be strong and to live. Theirs was not simply a relationship of shared love, but one of shared healing—they were comrades in arms, fighting the same battle. They made up for one another's weak points, and they filled the emptiness in one another's hearts. They were meant to meet, and they had, as though it were always destined to happen. They had met after experiences and hardships, and seeing Alec the way he was now filled Zack with overwhelming emotions.

"I'm glad you met such a good woman, Alec," he said.

Surprised by the words, Alec then smiled and nodded.

"As am I," he said. "She's just...she's amazing."

Alec was Zack's student, his companion, his friend, and his little brother. And as Zack looked upon Alec's smile in that moment, he felt that the last regrets he held in his heart—the traces of love he held for Shiori—were able to melt away and dissipate.

I am glad that the one who opened his heart and shared his feelings with her was not me, but him...

Zack downed the last mouthful of his ale and grinned.

"But there's still some bridges you'll have to cross if you want to spend the rest of your life with her. What do you intend to do?"

On the face of it, Alec would need to renounce his royal position and become an ordinary citizen—which was admittedly a strange way of putting it when he was for all intents and purposes a missing person—but the truth of the matter was, even now, Alec's name still existed on the royal family's family register.

It had been his little brother's one plea—his one condition—as he was left to remain at the castle without Alec.

"Please, even when you are gone, at least let me have some kind of proof that you and I are brothers."

Olivier had lost his other two brothers and his mother. And with his father soon to pass, he was in a position where there was nobody left that he could call family. And so, this was the one plea that he had selfishly requested.

Which meant that, to this day, Alec was still a member of the royal family. And until he did something about this, taking a foreign woman of unknown origin as his wife would be a very difficult path.

"I am still unsure what to do," admitted Alec. "But I have decided to stop running. I will turn my back on my past no longer. Even if it takes time, I will find a way through this. And then, I will ask for her hand in marriage."

The honesty in his eyes was clear to Zack. There was no confusion or hesitation in those dark magenta eyes—only unwavering resolve.

"Well then, there's nothing more for me to say," said Zack, filling their glasses with more ale.

And as they brought their glasses together in another toast, Zack did so with a hope in his heart.

May you both be happy on your road forward.

After more easygoing banter and further drinks, Alec happened to remember something.

"Speaking of the royal family, I heard a rumor that Olivier's gone and gotten himself a peach-colored slime. You know anything about that?"

Zack spit out the ale in his mouth in shock. Alec had clearly seen the reaction coming, for he whisked their plate of food off the table momentarily to protect it from the shower of ale.

"What?!" Zack exclaimed, wiping ale from the corners of his mouth and glaring at Alec. "What in the world?! I haven't heard a thing! Where'd you catch wind of that?"

"From the Lovners. It originally came from the Enqvist family, so it's likely true..."

The Enqvist were a count's family, the lord of which was a young boy who had gotten lost not so long ago during the fall. They were known as a very respectable family and not at all the type to go spreading unfounded rumors. Be that as it may, the story was just so wild and ridiculous that it was very hard to believe.

But it *did* remind Zack of something.

"Oh, hang on. I'd completely forgotten until now, but a letter came for you."

"For me?"

It had arrived at the Guild soon after Alec had left on the Lovner request. Zack had kept it safe, and he now took it out and passed it to Alec, who tilted his head quizzically.

The sender's name was Olivier Dia—the king's pen name.

"Quite rare to get a letter at this time of year," Alec muttered, tearing open the envelope.

As he read its contents, however, his lips began to cringe, until finally he let out a long sigh and put his head in his hands.

"Oi. Alec. What is it?" asked Zack hesitantly.

Alec passed the letter over without looking up.

The gesture was clear—*see for yourself*, it said.

To my dearly beloved Alec,

Are you doing well? The cold weather continues, and I pray you have not been pushing yourself since collapsing in the fall. I had considered visiting to check up on you during one of my inspections, but you seemed to have made a full recovery, so I was satisfied to watch from afar. That said, I beg of you, truly—do take care. It is my desire that you be well, and that you be healthy. So please, do look after yourself.

Oh, yes! You asked me what I would like for my birthday. I hope you don't mind if I just go ahead and write my request here.

I'm sure I'd love anything you choose, but there is something I want to ask of you. Namely, I'd really like a knapsack big enough to fit a single slime. I was on my way back from an inspection recently and just so happened to make a magic contract with one. It's utterly adorable and I so desperately want to take it on future inspections, but in a covert manner, of course—how easy I would be to spot if all you needed to look for was a blond-haired man with his peach-colored slime! So I want something I can hide the slime in, you see. Could you pick something for me?

Silence fell across the table.

How had this even happened? Zack moaned and let his head fall into his hands, just like Alec.

"He came?" Alec asked.

"He did."

"When?"

"In the fall."

"You didn't tell me."

"Well... I mean... He said it was covert."

And under no circumstances was Zack about to go telling Alec that Olivier had gone out of his way to meet the woman Alec loved.

"But why the slime...?" asked Alec.

That was a question even Zack wanted answered.

"Beats me..."

The two men shared grimacing smiles. Neither had any way of knowing that the king of their nation, Alec's little brother, had taken such a liking to Shiori's adorable little slime that, on his way home,

he'd entered into a magic contract with one, and done so without a hint of hesitation.

Interlude 2: Consolation Party for Mending Hearts

Clemens was sipping at a glass of liquor and savoring the taste of it when he heard a voice.

“Not drinking yourself into a stupor tonight? That’s a rare sight.”

The words were meant as a light jab—a joke—but there was also a kind consideration in Zack’s eyes as Clemens turned to face him.

“Yeah, I guess so...”

Clemens flashed Zack something of a pained grin as he swirled his glass. The clear liquor made little waves, causing the smooth, rich scent of barley to waft into the air.

“Can’t keep dragging these feelings along for the rest of my life,” said Clemens.

“Oh? Finally able to let it all go, then?”

“Bit early to say that, but...I’m getting there. A little more time ought to do it.”

By the time Clemens had realized the feelings in his own heart, the girl he’d longed for was already in love with his best friend. Or perhaps it was more correct to say that, on some level, he had always known—it was just comfortable being something more like a big brother. He’d let his feelings for Shiori warm him in secret—the girl who gave her everything just to live her best—and he’d been happy to watch over her from a distance that he felt was just right.

But then the *incident* had occurred. Clemens hadn’t been able to protect Shiori, or stop anything from happening. In just the two or maybe three months that he hadn’t seen her, almost everything between them had come to an end. All that remained were feelings of regret—Shiori had been horribly scarred, and Clemens had done nothing. He’d hated himself for it—when she needed protection most, he hadn’t done a thing. And so he had locked his love away.

You don’t even know. You don’t know that I know—that scars were not left on your heart alone.

Don’t look at me, she’d said.

Even now, Shiori’s heartrending screams refused to leave his ears. She didn’t remember any of it—she didn’t remember Nils and Clemens holding her down while Zack fed her a sedative mouth to mouth, and how she’d simply let him. But Clemens remembered all of it.

And he had realized then that Zack and Shiori were in love. They

were in love, but they had never once admitted it to one another, and in the end chose instead to become siblings.

And if Zack, who was closest to her, had decided to lock away his own feelings, then Clemens decided that he too could never reveal his own—especially when he'd been so close to her, and yet had been entirely unable to help her when she needed him.

It was a love that ended before it could even be professed, and at times it burned his soul. And yet, though there was a pain that ran through him when he saw her share a smile with Alec—the man with whom she had rediscovered feelings of love—more than anything else, he felt a sense of relief and solace. He saw them fight to live in the face of adversity, and he saw healing in both the woman that he'd loved and the man he called his best friend.

More recently, Clemens found himself at peace with how things had worked out. Both Shiori and Alec had gone through more than any one person should ever have to bear. So wasn't that enough? Wasn't it about time that the two of them found happiness?

"Well," said Zack, "I'm certain that you'll have no trouble finding a good woman. In fact, it's even weirder that you still haven't."

"I've had my fair share of chances," said Clemens with a wry grin. "And some of them were good women. But I feel it's rude to the other party to go into a relationship that you're not serious about."

He'd had his fair share of flings with women who wanted to play around, but there were some earnest women among them. However, none had captured his heart. As of the recent past, before meeting Shiori, it had always been like this. But he was a single man too, and this was not to say he hadn't at times been charmed by a woman or two.

"A good woman..." muttered Zack, sipping at the liquor that Clemens offered him. He smiled at the taste of it. "How about Nadia? Now there's a good woman. And you're already close."

Clemens had to chuckle—he hadn't expected Zack to name the very woman whose image had floated to the forefront of his mind.

"She's a good woman, all right..."

And had he not known her circumstances, he may well have already made a play for her hand.

"But she was betrothed to one of your best friends, no? We're not a good match in terms of status."

Just as they were entering into promises of marriage, the older brother of the man Nadia was seeing—the family heir—had passed away in an accident. Their relationship had thus been left undecided—the circumstances had changed, and the man was now the new family heir. But not long afterwards, he too had lost his life in a horrible accident, and Nadia's whereabouts had been for a time

unknown due to political upheaval in her homeland. It was a complicated picture, and as a result of it, Nadia had remained single ever since.

“She’s not that person anymore,” said Zack. “She’s like you—just another regular citizen. And besides, she said herself that she’s finally at peace with it all.”

“Be that as it may...” muttered Clemens.

“Clemens... You don’t make things easy on yourself, do you?” said Zack with a chuckle. “Even a gentleman’s gotta think of himself sometimes.”

“Says you,” replied Clemens, his lips turning up into a mischievous grin. “How about you then, Zack?”

Zack had once loved Shiori, but had since settled in the position of her older brother. He and Nadia also went way back. He knew her much better than he knew Clemens.

“The guy was one of my best friends,” Zack said. “I can’t go reaching for his former love. It’s not my place.”

“Zack...”

Clemens let out a sigh and filled Zack’s empty glass. The two men shared a wry grin.

“Looks like neither of us makes things easy on ourselves,” said Zack.

“You got that right.”

All the same, Clemens was curious about something.

“But before Shiori came along, you were never without a lover, Zack. What happened to all of them?”

Zack had seemed to get along well with the women he dated, and yet all of a sudden they’d disappear, and the relationship would be over. Zack’s brow furrowed at the question with a mix of shame and embarrassment.

“About that...” muttered Zack, sipping his liquor and heaving a sigh. “It starts off great. But they always end up saying the same thing and then leaving me. That I feel more like a brother than I do a lover...”

In other words, his own caring nature was stabbing him in the back.

“Zack...”

A thought then scratched at Clemens’s mind—if Zack and Shiori had ended up together, would the very same thing have happened all over again? Clemens brushed the thought away in a panic and looked for something to say.

“Well, I mean, I’m sure...there’s a good woman out there for you too.”

“Thanks...” said Zack.

The two men shared yet another wry grin.

"I gotta say," said Zack, looking down at his glass. "This is some tasty stuff. Got a kick to it but it's not bad at all. Is it Eastern?"

Clemens nodded.

"That it is. Quite the flavor, don't you think?"

Clemens took the bottle with its bold Eastern lettering and showed it to Zack.

"This is a potato liquor called 'A Hundred Million Years of Solitude.'"

Zack immediately spat a mouthful of the stuff out in shock, and coughed.

"The hell...?" he muttered. "Why would you give me something so ill-omened?!"

"But the taste is something else, no? I tried to get some of it into Alec too, but alas, it didn't work out."

"Clemens..."

But Clemens was laughing—celebrating the success of his prank. And though Zack glared at him begrudgingly for a time, eventually he too couldn't help but laugh.

Their brokenhearted drinking party went on until the early hours of the morning—the two men washed away lost loves with delicious drinks, and thought back on old memories.

Interlude 3: The Diary of Rurii the Familiar

■ December ☐☐

Today was a really tough day. We were descending to the bottom of the tower together when all this water seemed to come out of nowhere and it drenched *everyone*. I panicked and swallowed Shiori and Alec to carry them to safety, but they still got all wet. Everyone still told me I did great, though—feels awesome to be so helpful!

Shiori made a bath for everyone straight away. Humans can get sick if they're all wet like that. I don't have any trouble in cold climates, but all the same, I looove the feel of a warm bath. It seemed like the bath worked wonders on the whole party too.

All of the commotion made Annelie really tired, so she took a rest while Shiori and Alec went to investigate the floor that flooded. Once the water was drained we found all these magic stones, and I got one as a gift. It's all red and smooth and pretty. It's also really warm like when Shiori wraps me up in a big, tight hug, so I'm super happy. Thanks for giving it to me, Alec! I'll cherish it!

We went farther in and discovered that one of the trio of adventurers we'd met—the worst one—was dead. He was the worst because he'd tried to kill everyone, but even then Shiori and Alec looked a bit sad to see him like that. It's one of the strange things about humans. The feelings they have about mourning their own are pretty complicated. Well, that's what the grandfather in the sewers told me, anyway. I don't really understand it. Maybe someday I will?

We discovered the other two of the trio after that and decided to take them with us. I didn't mind—they didn't seem like bad people. They looked like they were going to die, but after warming them up they looked a bit better. Phew! We'll let them rest well tonight and then we'll head out tomorrow.

But I was wondering what Shiori meant when she said she was glad about “dropping into this country.” Did she fall from the sky? Maybe she's an angel. I mean, I *do* sometimes hear Alec muttering about her being his goddess.

■ December ☐☐

The two adventurers we helped out yesterday broke out with fevers. If they didn't get help, they were certain to die, so we had to

hurry. At first it looked like Alec was going to head off on his own to bring some knights back, but then we decided we'd all pitch in to help carry them back to town. And I helped too! I knew I could do it because I'd carried Shiori to Storydia when we first met!

But the adventurer named Julia—she was way lighter than Shiori even though she's taller. Apparently she hasn't been eating very well. I hope she gets better and can eat lots again. I was doing my best to carry her, so I want her to do her best too!

Everything went smoothly at first. But just as we were thinking we were getting close to town, we ran into a weird monster. It was like a big monkey and it was all white—I've never seen anything like it. It's called a Yeti, and it's so rare they call it a mythical beast. It looked really strong. It even seemed to smile as it looked at Alec and the others, who are really strong themselves. It didn't seem fazed at all, which I guess is why it's a mythical beast.

I left the fighting to the others and focused on protecting Frol and Julia. I heard Frol mutter, "Protected by a slime... Life really *is* full of surprises..." But it was a pretty rare experience—the only other person to know how it feels is Shiori!

That Yeti was *really* strong, strong enough to have Alec and the others in a bit of a panic. Alec and Clemens are no weaklings, but the Yeti seemed totally fine even when they cut and stabbed it. It didn't flinch at Nadia's magic either. Talk about unfair. It can even breathe ice magic!

And then, in the midst of the struggle, a bunch of snow jellyfish appeared. What a pain. I was thinking about how much I don't like them because there's always so many and they're awful to eat but then Nadia and Shiori took care of them. Shiori always says she's weak, but when push comes to shove I think she's super tough. I mean, she even landed the finishing blow on that Yeti with Alec and Clemens's help. I wish she was more confident.

Still, it's pretty wild that the Yeti would die from taking a bath. Apparently it's weak to heat. Even though baths feel super fantastic, for a Yeti they spell death—that's a rough life. Linus always says "Ugh, it's like heaven! Heaven, I say!" when he gets in the bath, but for that mythical beast it really *was* like a stairway to heaven.

You know what I couldn't help wondering, though? Are Yetis delicious...? Walt was curious too. Dennis thought the idea of it was repugnant, but how can you not be curious about Yeti meat? I got the feeling that Walt and me could probably become good friends. Unfortunately, we had to leave the body for the knights to examine, so I didn't get to eat it.

I don't even remember what happened past getting back to town and then eating dinner. By the time I knew anything it was morning of the following day. Well, actually, it was closer to lunchtime. We got to eat lunch together with Annelie and *whoa*, it was amazing! I'm sure when Frol and Julia get better they'll get to eat delicious food too! I hope they get well and that someday they get to go home. It seems like there's not much food there anymore, but they said they'll work hard to make delicious food. I'm rooting for them! Good luck, guys!

Shiori and Annelie became friends. Shiori became friends with Dennis and Walt too. They'd been on that adventure and they'd gained something valuable through it. And Shiori realized that there's already lots of valuable stuff in her life. She seemed really happy, and it makes *me* happy when there's more happy things in her life. I want her to keep going like this and find even more things like that. She's got good friends now, so I want her happiness to keep growing.

■ December ☐☐

We'd been at work for a few days, so we got to take a little holiday. After all, resting and recovering for the next job is just another part of adventuring.

Shiori still seemed a bit tired and her body was kinda stiff, so Alec gave her a massage. Shiori seemed to really like it. Sometimes she would utter something like, "Ugh...yes...right there..." and every time she did, Alec flushed red and grew a bit short of breath. I hope he's okay...

After her massage, Shiori fell asleep. As soon as she did, Alec leapt into the bath. I guess all that massaging must have worked up a sweat.

Zack came to deliver a letter for Shiori during the massage and even *he* was all red. He was like, "Can you...pass them a message? Tell them their voices can be heard outside the door..." but I don't know what he meant. I hope *he's* okay too...

The letter for Shiori was from Annelie. Apparently she wants to say thanks because some complicated thing or another was finally solved. We're all going to have dinner. It's supposed to be a super swanky place with super swanky food. I can't wait!

■ December ☐☐

Tonight we had dinner with Annelie and Dennis.

Like I said, it was a swanky place, so Shiori and everyone got all dressed up for it. Shiori and Alec looked so different from usual. Shiori went all red and she told me, "He's so handsome I can't even look him in the eye..." and Alec told me, "She's so adorable I just want to look at her all night." The two of them were all smiles. Like literally all smiles. Even Clemens and Nadia gave them weird looks.

At the restaurant I got these really delicious snacks. They were from this place called Enandel!

Thank you so much! They were so delicious and I loved them!

While I was eating my snacks, Alec got up to some mischief with Shiori. He was rubbing her back, playing with her even though me, Clemens, and Nadia were all right there. The old grandfather from the sewers told me that people play like that when nobody's looking, but Alec sometimes does it even when they're in places where people can see them. So maybe it depends on the person? I mean, but why not save it for when you're both at home and you can take your time?

Anyway, dinner with Annelie was so delicious. The meat I got to eat in Silveria was good, but the food at this restaurant was also really wonderful. I really hope I get to come back.

In the carriage on the way home, Shiori and Alec made a promise to one day officially become mates. They said that once they'd worked out their big problems, that's when they could be proper mates. They both know they're both hiding some things, so I'm sure they can work it all out. I hope they do it soon. I want them to work out their problems and then be really, really happy!

Side Story: The Holy Woman of the Moonlight

1

“Ugh...” Zack uttered.

His brow furrowed. He’d lost count of how many times he’d groaned that day. He was worried about the request ticket in his hand. He’d held it for an hour now, lost in thought, frowning all the while. He’d been like that since the moment it had arrived via express messenger bird.

Shiori had simply watched him in silence for a time, but now she turned to Alec. Rurii, too, leaned in curiously. Zack let out another groan, and Alec decided it was time he said something.

“What in the world has you so worried?” he asked.

“Is it a particularly difficult request?” Shiori chimed in.

But Zack didn’t reply. Instead, he flipped the request ticket towards them. The two adventurers quickly read the ticket, then chuckled as it all clicked into place.

Suppression Request.

Emergency level: S.

Difficulty: A-S.

*Multiple carrion crawlers to be exterminated on the outskirts of Dima.
Potential for multiple variants.*

Requester: Dima Garrison Knights.

At a glance, it was an otherwise ordinary, run-of-the-mill request. If any part of it required any extra consideration, it was the request’s emergency nature and its difficulty level. However, on this occasion there were a few other complications.

Any request that required the suppression of multiple variants was a task that would require at least a few A- or S-rank adventurers. Unfortunately, the most suitable adventurers were already out on different jobs, leaving only Zack and Alec.

But the biggest problem of all wasn’t that. It was...

“So there’s nobody else more suitable than you,” said Alec.

“For a bug beast suppression request,” added Shiori.

Zack groaned again. The reality of it pierced him like a blade, and

his face went pale. Zack Ciel was a renowned S-rank adventurer *and* guild master, but he also happened to fiercely loathe insects. It was well known that Zack hated a particular black bug with long feelers and a scuttling run, but it was a much lesser known fact that Zack's hatred in fact included *all* bugs. This was for the simple reason that however much he hated them, Zack never let his feelings show when he was out on the job. That said, enduring insects for long periods was especially mentally taxing on the man—so much so that, upon his return from such requests, he was known to spend an entire day in bed.

Given the emergency nature of the request now at hand, Zack did not have the luxury of waiting for other Guild adventurers to return home so he could assign them to the task. Emergency level S requests had to be responded to within two days. Zack preferred to consider each adventurer's suppression preferences and mental states when assigning requests, but he would have no such luxury on this particular occasion.

"Worrying isn't going to change anything," he muttered, finally making up his mind. "I'll go. I'll do it. Alec, I'll need your help."

Zack straightened up and went about putting together a party and a schedule.

"We'll be doing some camping, I imagine, so... Shiori and...Linus. I'll need the two of you also."

Bug-type beasts matured quickly, and some of them might have already entered their chrysalis stage. Carrion crawlers were giant caterpillars that matured into beautiful butterfly beasts. With that in mind, a good archer was a necessity. And given that they made their homes in the deeper parts of the forest, Shiori would be helpful for any outdoor camping.

With all the members selected, the party quickly discussed the details. They would depart that afternoon, so everyone split up and headed out to see to their individual preparations for the journey.

2

It was nearing sunset as the snow carriage arrived at its destination—Dima, a town on the edge of a forest in a hilly part of the land. It was a much smaller town than Tris, but it was a lively location surrounded by nature. Dima was blessed with wondrous farming resources, and thanks to their domestication of cold-weather magical beasts and their honey gathering efforts, the farming town did well for itself even in the off-seasons. The main street was lined with shops and various dining and drinking establishments, and these were often filled by those heading home for the day.

The townsfolk must have recognized them as adventurers by their dress, for a knight at the guard house by the front gates came to greet them. He introduced himself as Gillis Milveden, the captain of the garrison and also their client. It turned out he had just hit his midtwenties, which was quite young for one entrusted with the safety of an entire town. Gillis explained with a wry grin that he'd been expedited through the ranks because there was nobody else more capable.

Gillis shared a firm handshake with Zack, then took stock of the rest of the party. His eyes opened in surprise when he noticed Shiori. This was not a particularly rare reaction—many could tell at a glance that she was from the far eastern regions. Shiori did as she always did—she smiled politely and nodded—but Alec showed a hint of concern.

“My apologies,” said Gillis. “I was merely taken by surprise.”

Gillis bore no ill will—his reaction was simply because of the fact that Easterners were so rare. However, though it was only a short distance from the guard house by the outer wall through to the garrison quarters in town, Alec was still left grimacing at the eyes that peered at them from afar—the vast majority of them clearly focused on Shiori. And though the young among them were merely curious, the elderly townsfolk were considerably more suspicious.

“Storydia is much more open to immigrants,” said Linus, quietly. “But in the mountain villages, there’s still a lot of discrimination and distrust of outsiders. Especially among the elderly.”

Linus had grown up in the mountains himself, and understood life there very well.

“That, and there are quite a few who still frown upon the idea of females in battle,” added Gillis. “Even though we’re seeing more and more females in the field because the queen herself was once a knight...”

Long-held beliefs were not easily forgotten, and this was true of the biases unique to countryside villages. Shiori had, fortunately, felt little in the way of gender discrimination during her time in Tris.

“Well, as long as we don’t get any strange ones poking their noses into things,” muttered Zack.

He wasn’t going to say anything to upset their client, but all the same Shiori put a hand to the grumbling Zack’s arm.

“I’ll be fine, big brother,” she said, reassuring him.

Discrimination could be a potential cause of problems depending on the request. Fortunately, however, they would not be working with the townsfolk directly, so it seemed unlikely there would be any trouble. Shiori also didn’t think she’d run into anything quite like what she’d faced the first time she met Dennis Fryden. Even then, she was fortunate that they’d smoothed things over quite quickly.

“Well, if you say so...” said Zack.

He ruffled his own hair with a wry grin as Shiori looked up at him, the arm of her lover wrapped around her shoulders.

The garrison quarters were simple, but also clean and comfortable. Shiori and the rest of the party were ushered into a reception room where everyone properly introduced themselves. A beautiful female knight with silver hair made them tea, which they sipped at while Gillis explained the situation.

“I know this is a task we should be able to handle on our own...” he said, “and I apologize for calling you out here for such work. I simply never imagined someone as renowned as *the* Sir Zack Ciel would be the S-rank adventurer to answer our call.”

“Our other most suitable adventurers are out on other work. When I saw that it was an emergency, I answered the call. And I know the situation that the knights are in at present—trouble with numbers and reinforcements, right?”

“I’m so glad you understand. We’re under strong pressure from the residents here.”

Gillis let out a pained chuckle. The townsfolk had been demanding for days that the knights do something about their problems.

“We haven’t had any injuries yet, but I fear it will only be a matter of time. Several fields have already been destroyed, and livestock at some farms have been eaten.”

Carriion crawlers were omnivorous. Their appetites were especially big right before they entered their chrysalis form. When there wasn’t enough to eat around their nests, they weren’t past entering human settlements to feed, and farming villages always offered some kind of food. Winter vegetables, livestock—the kind of nutritional goodness that humans put work into growing and raising. And those humans, too, could be at risk of becoming food themselves. That was why crawlers had to be eliminated as soon as they were found.

“Some think we should speed up the harvesting and move the remaining livestock behind the walls, where it’s safe, but that’s dangerous too—we’re also seeing beasts at the outskirts of the forest that usually don’t venture out of its depths. We think they may be fearful of the crawlers. We’ve set time limits and we’re planning around it, but we have to consider guard duty too, and it’s slowing us down.”

“And you can’t rely on any local law enforcement groups to help? Or do they not have a vigilance committee here? Usually country towns have something like that.”

Gillis’s mouth drew into a tense line. He thought for a moment

before answering.

“There is local law enforcement, yes, but the members are all farmers and merchants. The best members they’ve got are hunters. I’m not comfortable sending them out against magical beasts. These are not the weaker local beasts they are used to hunting and tracking. In truth, they’re part of the town it is our duty to protect. I simply cannot allow them to be hurt.”

Shiori looked at the rest of the party. Alec shrugged, while Linus wore something of a pained grin, and seemed unsure of how to respond. They could all understand the concern about sending inexperienced local law enforcement out against magical beasts. However, many adventurers had started their careers in that field, and they couldn’t all be weak and powerless. That Gillis could state such a thing outright made it seem like perhaps their forces were experiencing some difficulties.

“In any case, there’s no getting around the fact that we don’t have enough man power. The townsfolk understand this too, but they’re losing confidence as the damages mount. Just this morning there was a quarrel at the guard house.”

“I’m sure you must have your hands full just guarding the place.”

There were eleven knights in total at the Dima garrison. And considering that the town’s population was around 1,500 people, splitting their forces to handle the bug suppression would still mean leaving their defenses open for at least a night. It was easy to understand why they were worried.

Dima was located some two days on foot from the border refugee camps. With town safety still at the forefront of everyone’s minds, the knights didn’t want to halve their forces.

“Back to the carrion crawlers,” said Gillis. “Whenever we get reports of them we’ve gone out and handled them. However, there’s just too many. And we’ve seen three variants among them.”

“You’re sure?” asked Alec.

Gillis nodded.

“They were all green with a silver tint. We’re sure of it.”

“Three variants...”

Magical beast variants were, by nature, usually rare. But if multiple variants had appeared in a short period of time, it could mean that the variants themselves were multiplying. That alone was cause for alarm.

The knights did their training in the forest areas, so they knew the area and its wildlife like the back of their hands—they had already worked out where the monsters had attacked and at what times. Based on that information, they’d determined two locations where the nest was most likely located.

“Among the refugees are those who have become thieves looking for supplies,” said Gillis. “They’ve formed gangs. Just the day before yesterday a village on the outskirts was attacked. Thankfully the situation was brought under control, but you can see why we want to avoid a situation where our forces are halved for even a night.”

Though some believed the knights could simply work with local law enforcement to cover these gaps, there was a clash between the two groups’ principles. Gillis glossed over the details, but in short, the townsfolk were particular and insistent upon their customs, and this was the source of the problems.

“That’s rough...” muttered Linus. It seemed he had memories of his own about such things from his past.

“Now, as for the bug’s nest...” said Gillis.

There were two places where the knights believed the crawlers to be nesting. There was about one kilometer between the locations. Considering they’d be on foot in a snowy forest environment, getting to them would take time. Though it was exceedingly rare to think that two separate packs of crawlers had set up nests in the same area, it *was* possible that the one pack was nesting at two locations.

“If we head to the point between the two locations, I can search for which one the crawlers are at,” said Shiori. “What do you think?”

“Ah,” said Alec, “we can use your search magic.”

He glanced at Zack and Linus, then nodded.

“Search magic? You mean to look for magic tools?” asked Gillis.

“It’s an improved version of the same thing,” said Shiori.

In its basic form, search magic was used to scan for items of magical power in more compact environments. Shiori had turned it into her own kind of search magic by stretching that same scanning net outwards while limiting the amount of magical energy she put into it. In essence, you could call it enemy-tracking magic.

Gillis looked confused so Shiori gave him a brief explanation, after which he nodded, impressed.

“Wow, so you’ve found an entire other application for it. How intriguing. And so masterful.”

Gillis then took out a map and placed it on the table in front of them all.

“This depicts the location,” he said.

There was a gentle slope to the target area. Fortunately, the area between the predicted locations of the two potential nests was fairly easy to reach, without any hindrances aside from the trees themselves. Reaching it by foot would be no problem.

“Well then, shall we make this midpoint our first destination? Shiori, can you use your search magic while we...actually, is that okay? That’s quite the distance to be applying your search magic net.”

Under normal circumstances, the longest Shiori stretched her search magic was about eighty meters. Now she would have to stretch that same magic over a much longer distance of five hundred meters. However, she had done this once before back in fall, when helping to search for a lost child.

"I'll be fine so long as I am allowed a little time to rest. I will be left quite drained if we have to depart as soon as I use it, or if I have to use it multiple times over a short period..."

"Well, I don't want you pushing yourself, but...we might not have a choice."

Alec's brow furrowed and he grumbled, but even *he* had to admit it was the most effective course of action.

"It'll be more tiring to go to both individual targets," said Linus. "It's an uphill climb the whole way. If we've got a way to definitively locate the nest, shouldn't we use it?"

"You're right," said Zack. "Okay, then we'll reach the midpoint and put the search magic into play. Once we've pinned down the nest, we'll take a ten-minute break and depart for it."

Everyone nodded in agreement.

"That settles the plan of action," said Zack. "And though I'd love to head off immediately..."

Carriion crawlers were nocturnal. It was not a good idea to jump into the belly of such wild beasts when they were at their most active—catching them while they were sleeping was a much safer bet. The party thus decided to depart the following morning. Gillis made sure there was a spare room for them to sleep in.

"I know we've already made a request of you all," said Gillis apologetically, "and this is a little difficult to ask, but...I'd like to send one of our knights along with you. It's a matter of face, you see."

Gillis was reluctant to even ask, but he knew it would look bad to leave a problem like this entirely to be solved by outsiders, even though they might be a small garrison.

"A companion?"

The knights were on friendly terms with adventurers in general, but they differed in a number of areas when it came to fighting. Zack was unsure if it was a good idea to allow an individual who was essentially a stranger to join them on a dangerous task that could involve magical beast variants. In this way, he made his opinion clear—he would prefer not to have a knight along.

"She won't get in the way, and I assure you she's most capable. I've also made sure she understands she must follow your orders."

The adventurers were all still worried about this when a female knight approached them. It was the same knight who had brewed their tea. She stood straight as an arrow and gave them a graceful

salute.

“I am Fanny Edin, a member of the Third Squadron of the Dima garrison knights.”

She had previously been with the magical unit of Tris’s main forces, and was well versed with magical swords. She was a magical swordsman, just like Alec. Were she an adventurer, she would have been around B-rank.

Fanny’s hair was cropped short, and its silver hue could look almost a light purple depending on the light. Her amber-colored eyes shone with strong resolve, though the impression she gave was not one that struck them as opinionated. She seemed trustworthy.

Shiori was glad and relieved that she did not seem as much trouble as they had expected, and she and the other adventurers smiled among themselves.

3

“Would you like to join me for dinner at the garrison cafeteria?”

Fanny’s question came just as the adventurers were thinking of retiring to their rooms for the evening. They had no reason to refuse, and in truth, they were a little worried about potentially stirring up trouble by eating in town, anyway. There was always the chance that some biased townsfolk or another might try something, and Zack was even more worried about this than Alec was. As for Shiori, she was quite used to being seen as an outsider, but she too wanted to avoid trouble where possible. Until Fanny asked them to join her, they had considered two options—eat some of the rations they’d brought for the expedition, or send Linus out to buy something, since he was the most amicable of the bunch.

“As long as you don’t mind,” said Alec.

Fanny shook her head and smiled.

“Right this way,” she said.

The adventurers left their equipment and baggage in their rooms and followed Fanny to the cafeteria. It was a neat, tidy space with a dedicated chef, and contrary to their impressions of the knights as stiff and formal, the location was relaxed and easygoing. Two knights were already at a table, chatting and eating before guard duty. Upon seeing the adventurers, they smiled and offered polite nods.

“Wow, this is quite the menu, huh?” remarked Zack.

“It really is,” added Linus. “And they’ve got skewers! That’s my order decided!”

“There’s not much in the way of entertainment up in the mountains,” said Fanny. “So at the very least they wanted to make sure we ate well. There’s alcohol for those who are off duty too.”

“Oh, whitefish stew sounds delicious,” said Shiori.

It was but a small-scale cafeteria for a troop of just eleven, and so there was only the one chef. She wondered if they’d be made extra busy or hectic if everyone wanted something different, so she ended up ordering the same as Alec.

The chef was a retired knight, and the dishes he made were both simple and nostalgic. They had the gentle taste of homemade cuisine. For knights who were often dispatched to places far from where they grew up, the taste of home was one they rarely tired of—it was a true luxury.

“The chef says the cafeteria is based around the idea of a local eatery,” said Fanny with a smile.

The adventurers and their knight companion ate for a time, chatting as they did so. When the two knights with them in the cafeteria finished eating, they stood to their feet, and one of them called out.

“Fanny. No need to go overboard just because you’re on the extermination squad.”

For a brief moment, Fanny’s expression grew troubled.

“Hey, watch your mouth,” said the other knight, who placed a hand on Fanny’s shoulder. “He doesn’t mean it like that. He’s worried about you.”

“Sorry...”

Shiori tilted her head—a strange and uncomfortable air hovered between the knights, as though there was more to this than what was in the words that had been exchanged. Fanny had struck them all as a good person...but had she gotten into some sort of trouble?

“Oh, my apologies,” said one of the knights to the adventurers, with an awkward smile. “Dima is a country town and...well, biases against female knights are still ever present here. Some of the residents don’t like it. Fanny’s handling it the best she can, but it hasn’t been easy going.”

“Oh. I, uh... I see...”

Shiori thought back to the eyes she’d felt following her when they’d entered town, and what Gillis had said at the time: “*...there are quite a few who still frown upon the idea of females in battle...*”

“To be honest, some of them just don’t like us knights in general,” said the other knight. “Probably just easier for them to complain to a woman than to the rest of us. Still, it’s no fun being on the receiving end.”

Shiori was shocked. In Tris and its surrounding villages, the local citizenry and the knights had built strong relationships.

“Dima never used to have a garrison,” said Fanny. “But the population has really increased over the last decade thanks to the

town's farming industry. The local law enforcement couldn't handle it all on their own, so they've long wanted a garrison. They only got it two years ago."

"So the town wanted the garrison, but now its citizens don't like you?" asked Shiori.

"That sentiment mainly comes from the older residents," said the knight who'd sounded a touch rude with Fanny earlier. "It's tough to find a compromise with that lot. There's the people who have always been here, and the people who moved in recently, and their opinions clash—lots of arguments over how the town should be managed and governed. More than half the population now here moved in from elsewhere, so we can't just ignore them. Some of the people, they don't care that we're knights—they just don't want outsiders butting into their business."

Though ultimately an increase in residents and those to carry the weight of the next generation was a good thing for the town, the development had been so quick that some just couldn't keep up with the changes. The knights found themselves in a position of authority, mediating quarrels that had once been solved internally, and some were unhappy with this.

"Not everyone likes the way the town is changing," said Alec.

"And it's not a matter of right or wrong either..." added Zack with a grimace. "With more people, you're going to get more arguments. All you can do about that is wait for time to solve the problem."

As the nation grew more prosperous, people were leaving the areas on the outskirts of the country and the mountainous regions where change was slow, and this had meant the extinction of many villages over the last few decades. And with more and more people moving to live in neighboring towns and villages, there was no way to avoid clashes between old blood and new.

It was the same as the friction between citizens and national authorities. What was happening in Dima was by no means rare.

"And then in our case, you've got our captain..." muttered the more curt knight. "I don't know if you'd call him too rigid or too conscientious, but...he's drawn a line between us and them and he won't budge on it. Maybe it's because he's from Tris, so he can't see how they do things in these parts..."

This time both the knight's companion and Fanny reacted.

"Oi."

"Hey now."

They didn't want him bad-mouthing a higher-ranked officer, but it seemed like that wasn't all. Nonetheless, it was not the adventurers' place to go sticking their noses into their clients' private matters.

Worry and bias against outsiders, prejudice against female knights

—it seemed these weren't the only problems the town faced. The air around the table grew awkward, so one of the knights spoke up to clear it.

"In any case, Storydia is a place that at least treats its knights rather well. I've heard it said that in other countries they're considered attack dogs for the state, and lesser than the people who pay the taxes to employ them. Compared to that..."

"Yep. There's a lot of places where being a knight is a dirty business, and the knights as a whole don't function the way they should. You can't build trust on a foundation like that," said Alec, who'd lived and worked outside of Storydia. "In some places, even the relationship between knights and adventurers has soured. Storydia could even be called an outlier in that respect."

"Oh, really?" asked Shiori.

"Yeah. This situation here, where the knights have sent a request for adventurer help—you certainly wouldn't see that elsewhere. Much of the work the two groups do could be considered the same, so they see each other as competition. The knights see adventurers as groups of rogues and rascals, and the adventurers...well, they say the knights are dogs that only listen to the orders of the state."

"Yep. Then there's the fact that knights are basically an organization designed to protect 'the nation,'" added Zack. "But in trying to protect the greater public, they can't always handle the smaller issues—the problems that slip through the cracks. But adventurers, they'll do that work and the individual jobs that knight squads don't have the capacity to handle. So then when it comes to who the general public is going to side with, well, of course they'll side with the people closer to them. It's no surprise that in some places knights don't think highly of adventurers."

The knights could do nothing but grin wryly.

"But to be honest, even in this country there's a lot of high-ranking knights like that. Can't help wondering if Fanny being sent to accompany you guys has something to do with that. You know—so they can write something like 'adventurers under the supervision of the garrison knights' or some such on the official report."

"Wait, are we being treated like we're assistants?" asked Linus.

"Control yourself," said Fanny, scolding the knight who just couldn't seem to keep his mouth shut.

Linus laughed off the comment, but Fanny was clearly flustered by one of her seniors speaking so openly about the garrison's internal circumstances. In every world, there were those for whom pride and face were real concerns, and there seemed to be a bit of that at play here too.

"Seems like no matter where you go, there are problems like

this..." muttered Shiori.

"Something similar back home?" asked Alec.

"Kind of..." said Shiori, with a hesitant nod.

The two worlds were split, and differed by the existence of magic and spells and the creatures wrapped up in them—but when it came to the subtleties of governing people and their hearts, it seemed things were not so different. Perhaps this was why Shiori had been able to adapt to her new world even though she had come from another, but in the current circumstances, she could do little more than grimace amidst complicated emotions.

4

Shiori and the rest of the adventurers went to bed early and were up at five the next morning, feeling well rested. There was still quite some time before sunrise, and the adventurers trudged out into the forest while it was still dark.

As they left the main gates, a few farmers who had woken early stared at them. Perhaps to show that they were in charge, Gillis and Fanny walked ahead of the adventurers, as if leading them towards the snow carriage. Gillis seemed unperturbed, while Fanny seemed noticeably awkward about the arrangement.

The adventurers shared shrugs as they hopped into the carriage and felt it rumble forwards. The path into the forest was about five minutes from town by horse. On the way there, they spotted half-destroyed huts and areas that had been cordoned off—apparently these had been home to livestock until the carrion crawlers attacked. They were told that the buildings were old and were likely going to fall to larger beasts anyway, but seeing how easily the areas had been destroyed reminded everyone of how dangerous the crawlers were, and it sent a shiver down Shiori's spine. Alec seemed to notice the slight paleness of her face, and he put a hand over her own to reassure her.

Finally, the carriage came to a stop before the half-hidden pathway into the forest.

"You can follow this trail for a time—it's used by the local hunters," said Gillis. "It fades out farther in, but you'll have Fanny to help you from there. They'll be counting on you, Fanny."

"Sir."

Shiori turned her gaze into the deep blue of the darkness which stretched out into the forest. There was almost nothing else in the way of sound besides the voices of those around her—the forest was wrapped in silence. In the forest, the snow could absorb sounds that would otherwise echo, but sounds from afar could also echo as if

nearby. For this reason, it was not a good idea to rely on sound alone when watching out for threats. Their particular party had search magic and their keen senses to help, but that was only because they were a party of veteran adventurers.

Thanks to Linus, who was an experienced hunter and especially sensitive when it came to reading the forest, Shiori's search magic would be largely unnecessary outside of emergencies. She did not want to hold the party up, but she was also the weakest when it came to strength and endurance—wherever possible, she wanted to conserve both her magic and her strength.

"We've got more than enough magical energy recovery potions," said Alec, "so don't hesitate to keep drinking them when you're feeling low on magic."

"Okay."

Zack looked over at them talking and noticed Alec's "For-Shiori" pouch filled with magical energy recovery potions.

"Alec," he said, his eyes growing wide, "don't you think you're crossing into overprotective territory with that thing?"

"I'm not on your level yet," muttered Alec in reply.

Alec couldn't believe Zack could say such a thing when his idea of protection had essentially been to keep Shiori indoors at all times. Rurii gave him a pat on the leg to soothe the man down, and Linus laughed.

"It's love, all right," he said.

Shiori blushed.

"It would usually take us around three hours if it wasn't snowing," said Fanny as they talked through the plan before heading off.

"Including ten-minute breaks, we're looking at about five hours. The snowy paths will add another two or three hours, I'd guess."

"Then we'll want to avoid battles where possible too," said Alec.

Considering they wanted to finish their task by sundown, they would be running tight on time.

"I've got poison arrows with me, so let's rely on them as much as we can," said Linus, tapping his quiver. "That said, with the GM and Master Alec on the team, I doubt many beasts will want to attack us."

The arrows Linus had brought with him were coated with a handmade paralysis-inducing poison—these were handy not just for capturing creatures alive, but also as a means for avoiding battle.

"As for sleep magic, I know that Alec and Shiori can't use it, but how about you, Miss Fanny?"

Magic that had a direct effect on the body, like healing or holy magic, was something like an innate skill that people were born with. This made it decidedly rare. Alec could use muscle-boosting magic, but sleep magic was beyond him. Shiori couldn't use either. Fanny

shook her head in answer to Linus's question—it turned out she was no different.

"Then we'll be relying on you in case of any trouble, Linus. Thankfully we don't have to worry about snow jellyfish or snow bears in these parts, though you'll want to be on the lookout for is grodas and white boars."

"Got it. If we find them, I'll send them to the sandman."

"There's also a number of bug-type magical beasts that make a home of these parts," added Fanny. "Most of them will be in hibernation, but we've confirmed that there are some packs of snowfield mantises and rainbow ladybugs."

"Insects, everywhere..." muttered Zack.

Shiori worried for her big brother. At a glance he looked calm and collected, but if one looked closely they'd see the slight twitch in his lips.

Rurii was weaving around the man's legs and gave him a poke as if to say, *I'll take care of the bug problem!*

"Ah, thanks, Rurii," muttered Zack as the slime wobbled.

Alec and Shiori kept their chuckling to themselves.

"All right then," announced Zack. "We'll keep ourselves out of battle where possible and head towards the destination. We'll be counting on you as we approach, Linus."

"You got it, GM."

"Snowfield mantises, huh? Sure would like to avoid them, but they're often spoiling for a fight. If we find them we'll take the initiative. Same with the ladybugs. Alec, Miss Fanny—you're on them if we spot them."

"Got it."

"Understood," said Fanny. "Also, just Fanny is fine."

Just as Gillis had promised, the knight showed a willingness to fall in line. Zack appreciated that she wanted to put them all on equal terms too.

"All right. Well then, Fanny, we'll be counting on you too. Linus, Shiori, and Rurii—you'll be protecting us from the rear. We'll handle any other magical beasts depending on what they are. As for our formation, I'll take the lead, Linus and Fanny are in the middle, and Alec, Shiori and Rurii are our rear guard."

"Got it."

"We'll take ten-minute breaks each hour. Once we're within a kilometer and a half of the destination, we'll take an hour-long break. Then we'll head for the midpoint between the two potential nests. Once there, Shiori will use her search magic to pin down the nest. We'll take another break then head out. Sound good? If it doesn't look like we'll make it by an hour before sundown, we'll set up camp."

Everyone looked to one another in confirmation, and nodded. Zack nodded back, then turned to Gillis.

“Well, we’ll be off then,” he said. “Assuming everything goes to plan, we’ll be back by sundown tomorrow.”

“Understood. I apologize that we couldn’t be more help. Good luck out there, Fanny. Consider this a good opportunity to observe another group in action.”

“Sir...”

Fanny’s eyebrows drooped with some uncertainty, and Gillis gave her a pat on the shoulder.

“You can’t see the forest for the trees of late,” he said. “Time to get outside for a bit, refresh yourself, and broaden your horizons.”

He used the words “refresh yourself,” but it felt more like he was saying “learn the ropes.” Perhaps she had been put with them for more than just the honor of the garrison knights.

“Thought he might be hiding a more cunning side to him at first, but he seems like the type to look after those underneath him,” said Alec.

“Yes,” agreed Shiori.

And so, the party took off into the depths of the forest. Gillis and the knight who was with him saw them off with a salute.

Storydia in the midst of winter was a place where the snow could pile up so deep that it got to three meters high in some places. Fortunately, Dima’s geographical location meant that the snowfall was comparatively low—the overhanging tree branches helped to keep the ground clear, and the snow only got to one meter deep where it fell the most. All the same, it was not an easy place to walk. The party trudged on, and where the snow was especially deep, Alec and Fanny cleared a path with their fire magic.

Walking through snowy paths with a rucksack full of expedition equipment was tough work. When Shiori had just been starting out, she got tired easily and her legs quickly grew stiff, and for a time she wondered if she’d be able to keep on going. Surprisingly, however, it was just a matter of getting used to it. Shiori was in much better shape now than she had been back then too. Still, it was tiring walking the gentle uphill slope, and she let out a breath from behind her collar.

“Tired?” asked Alec.

“Just a little.”

His eyes were always quick to notice such things, and he put a large gloved hand to Shiori’s cheek. The gesture energized Shiori—it let her know that she had support by her side.

Shiori looked up at her lover and whispered a soundless thanks. Alec had turned his attention back on the path ahead, but the corners

of his mouth turned up into a smile, as if he'd felt the message.

"That's about an hour," said Zack. "Let's take a short break."

They stopped under the branches of a large tree. Shiori used her ice magic to craft two benches, and placed snow bear pelts over the top of them. Then she prepared some boiled water and passed it around to everyone. It was a luxury for a short ten-minute break, but it was a necessity for keeping them all well rested and ready for the next leg.

"Thanks," said Zack, "but wow, you're really something."

Shiori had only ever worked with the S-rank Zack on two occasions, both outside of the snowy seasons. He couldn't help but let out a sigh of admiration, seeing her winter expedition work with his own eyes. Linus was the same, and he sat on one of the benches with a glimmer of glee in his eyes.

"I can scarcely believe it..." uttered Fanny.

She had heard that Shiori's job was taking care of the campsite and similar duties, but she was still surprised by what she saw.

"I hope I'm not being rude, but I had assumed you were little more than a cook," she said.

"Yep, I think that's about what everyone thinks at first," said Alec with a chuckle. He took a sip of his warm water, then went on. "I know I did. I thought it was just food and washing, and what a shock I was in for. Couldn't believe my eyes when she directed us all towards the baths."

"Huh? Baths?!"

The look of surprise on Fanny's face was too much, and Shiori broke into a giggle. In many ways this conversation felt part and parcel of meeting someone new.

"Hey, I'm not joking here. I was genuinely shocked," said Alec. "Usually the best you get is a wet towel to wipe yourself with. But a bathtub? It was more than I could take."

"You really were very surprised, weren't you?" said Shiori.

Alec had always had a sharp edge to his eyes that made him difficult to approach, and that first expedition they went on was the first time she realized that he was actually quite expressive. That she found his shock and surprise utterly adorable, however, was of course a secret.

"In which case, will we have a bath tonight?"

The expectation and excitement was front and center on the knight's face as she asked—she, too, was adorable.

"Yes. I can't make baths just anywhere, but so long as we have a clear space where the snow isn't too deep, I can do it."

"I know of a few places that may be suitable."

"Well then, that's settled," said Zack. "Fanny, you're picking our

campsite location.”

Fanny had done her training in the forest, and knew the location by memory.

“Leave it to me,” said the knight with a confident nod.

Shiori enjoyed seeing the excitement on Fanny’s face, and just like that, their break was over and they were back out hiking towards their destination.

“Still haven’t seen a living thing,” said Zack. “Is the forest always like this?”

They’d sensed a few things here and there, but that was it. They’d seen so little it was like they’d seen nothing at all. There were less magical beasts in general in the snowy seasons, but winter beasts tended to be more dangerous. All the same, it was odd that they hadn’t even seen a single bird since they entered the forest. Fanny dropped into thought for a moment before answering.

“Actually, there’s usually more smaller wildlife around,” she replied. “The residents come out here to hunt too, so there must be some reason we haven’t seen any.”

“I see. So it’s the effect of the carrion crawlers?”

“Quite possibly,” said Linus. “Maybe the whole reason they went down towards town is because there was nothing left here to eat.”

Linus had once been a hunter himself, and he knew the forests and mountains like the back of his hand. He wasn’t going to miss any details.

“There’s something in the air around here,” he continued. “It’s got all the animals on guard and in hiding. Ah, over there. Like that, no?”

Linus pointed above his head with a casual gesture, which Shiori followed. She was surprised by the sight that met her eyes—something was shining a pale yellow under the leaves of the tall trees that filled the forest. It pulsed with light, just like a firefly.

“Yep, those are fireflies all right,” said Linus. “Well, snow firefly larvae. Usually you’d find them much lower on the trees, but if they’re up that high, it’s because they’re afraid of something.”

“Larvae...?” Zack grumbled.

To anyone who didn’t know any better, he sounded like a man being cautious, but those who did recognized his fear.

“Larvae... That means...”

What Shiori imagined then sent a shiver down her spine. She knew exactly what larvae looked like. And even though the party was heading out to suppress a nest of giant bug-type larvae right now, it still sent a sliver of panic through her to encounter an entirely unexpected bug in this way. Fanny must have been thinking the same thing—her face tensed slightly.

“I don’t feel particularly disgusted by giant caterpillars, but there’s

something about regular-sized larvae..." said Fanny.

"I feel you..." replied Shiori.

The dim light of the fireflies was wondrously beautiful against the white snowy landscape, but this impression was dimmed again by the fact they came from bug larvae—nobody wanted to imagine the bugs dropping on their heads from up on high.

"Not a big fan of bugs in that form?" asked Alec.

"Not really..."

Alec pulled her in close with a grin.

"Then stay near," he said. "I'll brush any away should they fall."

"Thanks..."

Shiori breathed a sigh of relief and walked a touch closer to Alec.

"Fanny, you okay?" asked Linus kindly.

"I got used to this during my training," she replied. "But to be honest, that doesn't exactly mean I'm okay with them..."

"Is that so?"

Linus admitted that he couldn't *quite* do for Fanny what Master Alec offered Shiori, but he instead took the poncho covering his cloak and put it on her head. Zack, meanwhile, looked at the two women and the gentlemanly treatment they received with a certain envy, and let out a lonely groan. *Someone help me out too*, it seemed to say. And it was, without a doubt, what he wanted to say aloud but couldn't bring himself to.

So it came down to Rurii to respond, who, with a tremble of *Leave that to me!* climbed up Zack's body and nestled atop his head of red hair.

Anti-insect defense, at your service! the slime seemed to say.

Zack was equal parts grateful and unnerved by the slime's goodwill.

"Thanks..." he muttered with some awkwardness.

"Big brother..." uttered Shiori, unsure of what else to say.

"Aren't you lucky," said Alec. "Best equipped out of all of us, now."

"Shut it, you."

But however Zack felt about it, Alec was right. So, with their slime-capped S-rank adventurer leading the way, the party worked their way through the snow firefly parts of the forest and farther into its depths. As the path they followed faded, they began treading into less explored territory.

"Well, I guess they were never going to let us in this deep without reacting," muttered Zack.

There was a sharp look in his eyes as he ushered the now red and on-guard Rurii from his head and unsheathed his great sword.

"Wish they'd just stayed quiet and hidden... Now we're going to

have some work on our hands.”

Alec brought forth his magic sword, keeping Shiori protected behind him. Linus and Fanny, too, readied their weapons.

They all felt it—the slight sense of something odd mixed with the cold air around them. It was the unique presence of magical beasts, and the magic essence that drifted from them. Suddenly, the air filled with a low quivering sound.

“Here they come!” shouted Alec, just as the beasts revealed themselves.

A pack of white insects emerged from between the trees and the harsh sound of their wings echoed around the party.

“Snowfield mantises!”

The magical beasts were carnivores that measured roughly 1.5 meters in length, and they were considered one of the larger varieties of bug-type magical beast. They traveled alone in the summer but when food grew scarce in the winter, they formed and moved in packs. Blocking the party’s way at this moment were fifteen of the beasts.

Their half-transparent wings were spread wide and shook angrily—a gesture of intimidation. The low sound of them was like the hum of machinery, and it seemed to echo through to the pit of everyone’s stomachs. It was impossible to know exactly where their compound eyes were looking at any given time, a point that made them all the more disconcerting.

A grin grew on Zack’s face. It was not his usual jovial smile—it was instead ferocious. It was the kind of intimidating look that, were his opponent a human, it would have withered their confidence before he’d even landed a blow.

“To battle!” shouted Zack.

Just as he had said during their discussion before their departure, Zack was not about to wait for the insects to take the initiative. He roared with deadly intent as he stepped in, catching the two lead mantises off guard and slicing them in two. As he brought his sword back into a secondary swing, he cleaved right through another two of the beasts.

“Amazing,” uttered Shiori. “They’re A-rank difficulty and he took out four in an instant.”

His presence in battle was frightening—the weak of heart would surely fall to Zack’s pressure alone.

Alec and Fanny entered the fray moments after him, clearing out a few beasts themselves. And though they were both wielders of magical swords, the way in which they fought was markedly different.

Alec’s swordsmanship leaned on augment magic—imbuing his blade with fire or lightning, for example. This gave his sword extra

force and allowed him to deal considerable damage. It was well suited to the man, whose attacks put his considerable size to good use.



Fanny, on the other hand, cast attack spells while fighting with a thinner long sword. She wore down her enemy's strength with her magic, then stabbed at its weak points with her sword, which she wielded with exquisite finesse. Though her spells were not as strong as a mage's, her magic worked as a way to supplement her lack of physical strength, and this was the foundation of her style.

Both approaches had their strengths and weaknesses. And both individuals firmly understood their own personalities and tendencies and had built appropriate styles around them.

The pack of mantises was quickly whittled down to just five. It was almost hard to believe they were really A-rank difficulty. The S-rank Zack, and Alec (who was on the cusp of S-rank himself) could have handled the pack entirely on their own, but Fanny put up a good show—she fought like one who was accustomed to battle as part of a group.

"Guess there's nothing for us to do but sit back and watch," said Linus.

"Indeed...but don't let your guard down," added Shiori.

But the friendly smile on Linus's face grew into a serious, sharp stare as he studied their perimeter. Shiori readied herself too, while Rurii took up a position watching their blind spots.

Then there was a sound in the air like the ring of a bell, and the further cooling of the already frigid air. It was a sign—another magical beast was closing in, one with a strong aura of ice magic.

"They must have caught the scent!" said Linus.

A number of shapes, all of them glimmering with a rainbow light, appeared from between the trees. Linus didn't miss a beat—or an arrow—taking aim and firing immediately. A hard clang echoed through the forest along with a high-pitched cry as a shape fell to the snow, where it twitched and spasmed before finally expiring.

A pack of rainbow ladybugs had arrived—giant beetles wrapped in a rainbow sheen. The magical beasts' hardened wings sparkled with the frost that wafted from them due to their unusually low body temperature. But contrary to their wondrous appearance, the beast was a fearsome carrion scavenger. That was why they'd appeared—they'd likely caught scent of the snowfield mantis corpses. A portion of the arriving ladybugs were already descending upon the bodies. The only word to describe the sight of a pack of the thirty-centimeter-long bugs feasting on corpses was "horrifying."

"Why does every single bug always have to run in packs?!" grumbled Zack. "I hate it!"

"Doesn't help that they're so aggressive," said Alec. "Shiori, Linus! Be on guard!"

“Got it!”

“Fanny!” shouted Zack. “Could you circle back to focus on protection?”

“Understood!”

The rainbow ladybugs had the party surrounded. Clearly they didn’t have enough carrion to feed on, so they’d decided to just make some more. Ice particles floated on the freezing air sent from their wings towards the adventurers.

Shiori quickly cast a wind barrier to keep the cold at bay while Alec and Zack sliced down a number of the bugs with their blades. The buzz of their wings faded away as the beetles fell to the snow, where a waiting Rurii happily swallowed them.

“Might be angry that we’re spoiling their dinner,” said Linus.

“Seems so.”

None of them wanted their lives to end with them as bug food. But even here in the midst of a situation that would have wiped out anything less than a C-rank party, they remained calm—this was no threat to them.

“I feel so safe...” Shiori uttered.

She felt a little awkward playing a B-rank support role in a party with an S-rank and two A-rank adventurers, but she knew that battle was not where she truly excelled. Nonetheless, she kept her eyes peeled, and she knew that when it came to magical beasts with low body temperatures that were only active in the winter...

“Allow me to assist!” Shiori cried, casting her air-conditioning magic.

It didn’t have to be hot—it just needed to be warm enough that it felt pleasant against human skin. On cue, the freezing air around the adventurers began to heat up. The bugs weakened, unused to the warmth in their bodies, and their movements grew dull. Shiori let out a sigh of relief—everything had gone just as she hoped.

“Huh... This magic...” uttered Zack. It was the first time he’d seen her use it for offense, and he let out a low whistle of admiration.

“Air-conditioning magic,” said Alec, giving her a pat on the shoulder. “Very effective against winter beasts.”

“Yep,” replied Shiori with a smile.

Fanny, meanwhile, was flabbergasted.

“What? I... This... Is this combination magic?!”

“Oh...” murmured Shiori.

Though it was just another day at work for Shiori and her companions, who were used to it, Shiori’s air-conditioning magic was in fact a combination of both fire and wind magic. Mages that could cast multiple magics simultaneously, or combine them, were incredibly rare. Balancing the magic levels was difficult—if they were

not kept in a state of carefully controlled equilibrium, one magic would inevitably cancel the other out. If past records were anything to go by, there was only one mage in the last few centuries who was able to combine three magics at once. And when it came to dual combination magic, this number rose somewhat—but only to the still-tiny twenty mages in total.

“I know you’ve got questions, but save them for later,” said Alec.

Fanny snapped back to reality.

“Then later it is!” she cried. She zapped a bug with her lightning before deftly stabbing it where it was most weak, then dove once more into battle.

“I can see why the captain recommended her,” muttered Alec.

“Girl’s got guts.”

He and Zack trudged towards the remaining magical beasts.

Fanny was considerate and held herself well in battle. Shiori couldn’t understand why Dima’s townsfolk would take issue with her. Perhaps it was because she was an outsider.

The whims of a person’s likes and dislikes are rarely very logical.

Because you were a woman. Because you were an outsider. That was all the reason some needed to make others outcasts, even when, in truth, they were not much of reasons at all. Everyone met people that, for whatever reason, they had trouble accepting. However, there was not a person who did not feel *something* when they were treated as a lesser being.

I hope it’s like big brother said, and that it’s something that changes with time...

Shiori thought back to four years ago when people had avoided her, thinking she was some mysterious foreigner from a faraway land. Even now it sent a slight shiver of pain through her.

When the fight ended, Alec and the others sheathed their weapons and returned. Linus then strolled off to collect the arrows he’d fired and look for loot among the fallen beasts.

“Good work, everyone,” said Shiori. “No injuries?”

She quickly took a look at everyone’s condition. As she probably should have expected, none of them had even the slightest nick.

“That air-conditioning magic made it all easier,” said Alec with a smile, reaching into one of his pouches (the For-Shiori pouch, of course) and taking out a magic recovery potion. “Take this.”

“Th-Thanks.”

The battle had ended much more quickly than Shiori had expected, and she had only used about thirty percent of her total magical energy. Still, Alec was likely worried all the same, so she took the potion and drank half of it down.

“I’d heard stories about that air-conditioning magic,” said Zack.

“Not bad at all. Smart thinking, in fact.”

It was especially effective against magical beasts that were weak to changes in temperature. Zack looked happy the way a big brother might upon seeing his younger sibling’s work up close, and he reached out to give her hair a ruffle but stopped himself and instead gave her a pat on the shoulder. It was a different kind of joy she felt from when Alec praised her efforts, and it filled her heart, rising to her face in the form of a smile.

“Um... About that magic,” said Fanny, who had been waiting somewhat excitedly for the adventurers to leave enough space for her to enter the conversation.

It was clear that she was bursting at the seams to ask about it, but Shiori’s eyebrows drooped slightly—she knew that, unfortunately, there wasn’t all that much to say about it.

“The combination magic, you mean?” clarified Shiori.

“Yes. I don’t mean to sound rude, but you’re a low-level mage who can wield combination magic with ease. I’d like to know why. And was that magic before one of your own creations?”

“Yes, it was. But, um...”

“Is it that you can’t talk about the development of your magical abilities?”

Fanny’s shoulders slumped in disappointment, sending Shiori into a minor panic.

“No, it’s not like that,” she said. “But it’s less about developing magic, and more simply practice. You could say that it’s *because* my magic is low level that I am able to wield combination magic in this way.”

“I don’t understand.”

“When one’s magical energy levels are lower, it is easier to hold multiple magics in equilibrium. I realized that with practice, making subtle adjustments is not so difficult.”

“So...you’re saying the combination magic is harder for those with higher levels of magical energy.”

“Yes.”

Fanny was astounded, and stood with mouth agape, dumbstruck. But an instant later, she looked at Shiori as though she still wasn’t fully satisfied.

“I’ve never gone as far as proving my theory, so I can’t say that it’s a definitive answer,” said Shiori. “But let’s say you have some water and some juice, and you’re told to mix the same amount of both together. Which do you think would be easier—working with cups, or buckets?”

“In that case...cups, I suppose,” replied Fanny. “But even then it wouldn’t be easy without practice.”

“Right. I believe that combination magic works the same way. If you are working with cups, you can practice until you get it. But when it comes to buckets...well, practice is a lot more difficult.”

“Hm... I see your point.”

Fanny still didn't seem entirely satisfied, but she at least understood what Shiori wanted to say. All the same, she didn't want to give up straight away, and so tried casting some fire and wind in either hand. But just casting two magics at the same time was no simple feat, and the fire went out with a strange swirling sound, leaving only the wind magic. Based on the circumstances, it was probably safe to say that Fanny was more skilled with wind magic than fire—these were the magics that were easier to cast and maintain.

“A pity,” she said. “I had hoped that if there were some easy method to casting combination magic that I might be able to improve my abilities in battle. It's not that simple, though, is it? I admire your dexterity, Miss Shiori.”

“Just as I admire your own magical power and swordsmanship,” replied Shiori. “With my limited magical power, even support is sometimes a struggle for me, so using it for housekeeping purposes is about as much as I am capable of. Defeating a magical beast on my own would be quite the tall order.”

Fanny let out a breath of surprise then looked down at her feet.

“I apologize,” she murmured. “I was insensitive. I know how painful it feels to be told that you are not strong enough.”

“Please, think nothing of it.”

An awkward air settled over the party, at which point Alec gave Shiori a pat on the shoulder. Rurii trembled at Fanny's feet and gave her a reassuring poke.

“Sorry for the wait!” said Linus. “Got all my arrows back!”

Linus's timing was perfect. Whether it was intentional or not, his bright expression brushed off the awkward air surrounding them all in an instant.

“Also picked up some things of value too. Not a huge haul, but still.”

“Sorry you had to do it alone.”

“S'all good! It's where I shine, anyways.”

Linus held out an open hand to reveal a handful of magical stones. They were transparent with an edge of dull blue. Ice magic stones—spoils dropped by the defeated rainbow ladybugs. He also had a snowfield mantis wing, which was half-transparent like a pane of frosted glass. It sparkled with a strange, iridescent, rainbow light.

“Oh? Was there a variant among the pack?” asked Alec.

“I don't know. Was there?”

Shiori tilted her head. She hadn't remembered seeing a particularly unique mantis among the pack.

"Oh..." muttered Zack, remembering something. "The snowfield mantis variants don't look all that different from the regular ones, but their wings are harder. Not easy to tell them apart at a glance."

"Wow, I had no idea."

The wings, which were quite beautiful, were processed into craftwork, but many disliked them because they were originally part of the mantis's body. With that in mind, most such handiwork went into the private collections of bug lovers or the slightly eccentric.

"It'll fetch a pretty good price, so it's worth taking home," said Linus, carefully wrapping the wing before placing it in his knapsack.

Shiori called out to Rurii, who had been quietly absorbing a few of the fallen bugs, and the party took off walking again.

"Still...pretty dangerous to have carrion scavengers out there attacking living things for food," said Zack, as they headed towards their next rest point.

It was rare for scavenger bugs to attack living creatures when their prime source of nourishment was the dead, but it wasn't entirely rare—it came down to whether food was available or not.

"They're usually too intimidated to venture into human settlements, but if this situation keeps up, it feels like only a matter of time before someone gets injured or worse," added Alec.

"Yep," nodded Shiori.

And the carrion crawlers had already ventured into fields and attacked livestock. It was very possible they were running out of food within the forest itself.

"I apologize."

The words came from Fanny. Everyone was taken aback by their suddenness.

"Um... Why would you need to apologize?" asked Shiori.

"Because...we knights are making the Adventurers' Guild clean up our mess."

Fanny rubbed the handle of her sword with a gloved hand. It was embroidered with the mark of the northern knights, and probably a provision.

"As you all know, knights have been dispatched to the border on account of the unrest in the Empire," said Fanny somewhat awkwardly. "The knights are in dire need of reinforcements almost everywhere. As a result, we're not able to head out on our regular extermination trips... We never intended to slack off on the job, but it seems more escaped our hunt than usual. There are some who think it's just a case of there being an increase of magical beasts this year, but nonetheless, we knights are still partially to blame."

Fanny let out a sigh, then asked that they all keep what she'd told them a secret.

"You might have heard about this already, but in the fall a nest of giant spiders was discovered in the forests near Tris. Fortunately it was exterminated, but a noble child playing in the area was attacked... That he was saved and the giant spiders taken care of was in no small part thanks to the work of adventurers. It became something of a problem for the knights internally."

It was a story Shiori felt she'd heard before, and she looked over at Alec, who shrugged his shoulders. Perhaps it wasn't necessary to let Fanny know that they themselves had been the very adventurers that had done that work.

Regular extermination trips of monsters that lived around and near towns—especially bug types, which were quick to multiply—was an important duty for Storydia's knights. When exterminating large packs of them, it was not altogether uncommon for a bug or two to escape the hunt and start multiplying all over again. Nonetheless, it had to have been a worry for the knights.

"I can't speak for whether it is or isn't a result of the knights lacking reinforcements," said Zack, "but it's not just knights or adventurers who protect the people. It's both of us. We all have limits to what we can do. I say, as long as you're working together to protect what you want to protect, and each of you is making up for where the other is weak, that's a win," he chuckled.

"I very much hope so, but it's not easy," said Fanny with a grimace.

5

The party trudged through the snow and ever deeper into the forest. Fanny was still dejected, and Linus struck up some conversation to help lift her spirits. Shiori looked on, letting out a little sigh.

"Just getting along with people is hard enough," she said to Alec. "It's so much harder when it comes to groups and organizations."

"I suppose. But if you live in human society, you're part of it whether you like it or not. Villages, towns, countries...you could say we're protected by these groups and structures. The clash of differences in opinion can feel suffocating, but...as long as you live as part of a community, you can't really avoid it—you have to look for compromise."

Shiori glanced up at Alec. There was a depth to his words, colored by his past. Though he walked on towards their goal, his eyes seemed to wander into old memories.

Alec's family was one of good lineage. However, he himself had entered it as an illegitimate child, and he'd told her it made his position within the family weaker. Fortunately, he'd built up a good relationship with his younger brother—the family heir—but when surrounding families had wrapped the two of them in a struggle over inheritance, Alec had left. He simply couldn't stand the pressure.

Alec had put that particular structure—family—behind him, and chosen the life of an adventurer. That was the compromise he had made, and it had given him the life he had lived until this very day.

And I, too, have lived protected by that very structure...that of the adventurer.

Unlike the process of becoming a knight, one could easily register as an adventurer as long as they had a name and address. Though adventurers were sometimes looked down upon as a collection of vagabonds and mysterious strangers, adventurers' guilds were publicly recognized organizations, and many of their members had once been nobles themselves. Guilds were thus generally considered more trustworthy than vigilance committees made up of local residents.

For Shiori, who was for all intents and purposes a person of unknown Eastern origin, the structure of the Guild guaranteed her the social standing of an adventurer. Yes, she had had some issues with the language when she joined, but because there were no other issues, the Guild had recognized her application. For this she was eternally grateful—as she was, of course, to Zack, for being her guarantor.

Organizations and structures...

It had been four years since Shiori had been dropped into this new world. Was she now just another element of Storydian society? Was she a part of that structure? As she pondered on the thought, she felt Alec's hand on her cheek. He looked down at her with a smile. *It's okay for you to be here*, he seemed to say.

Thank you, Alec.

She lived in the kingdom of Storydia, and she was a part of an organization that protected it. She was a Storydian.

She smiled back at the one she loved, and his fingers gently rubbed her cheek before pulling away.

The party encountered magical beasts a number of times, but most of them were quickly put to sleep with Linus's poison arrows. They fought that which could not be avoided, but nothing could stand up to the might of an experienced party with an S-rank among them. The party thus neared their goal much quicker than they had originally expected.

Fanny looked around, then checked her map.

"We're getting within 1.5 kilometers of our goal," she said.

Zack stopped somewhere out of the way of the falling snow to look around.

“Great—let’s take our main break then,” he said. “The crawlers will likely still be sleeping, but now that we’re closing in on the nest, keep your guards up. Rest, but keep your eyes peeled.”

A one-hour break wasn’t long, and making effective use of that time was Shiori’s job as a housekeeping mage.

“Shiori, don’t work too hard, you hear? No need to overdo it when we’ve got food at hand.”

“It’s fine, big brother,” she replied. “We’ll just be having my portable foods.”

Shiori chuckled at the way Zack was a step more worrisome than Alec. Fanny, meanwhile, looked puzzled.

“You are siblings?” she asked, before adding, “I apologize. Perhaps that was out of line.”

Fanny was curious because however you looked at it, Shiori and Zack were of entirely different races. She had been puzzled about Shiori’s use of the term “big brother,” but quickly realized it might be insensitive to pry. Shiori assured her there was nothing to worry about.

“We’re not blood relatives, no,” said Zack. “I’m more like a guardian to her, so I think of myself as her big brother.”

“Easterners are decidedly rare, and so I sometimes found myself wrapped up in trouble here and there,” added Shiori. “Zack helped keep me safe when I first arrived in Storydia—it’s largely thanks to him that an outsider and foreigner like myself can now live in relative peace.”

It was no overstatement to say that Shiori would not be who she now was without Zack. He had found her and helped her settle into life in Storydia—in many ways, she owed her life to him.

Zack was embarrassed by Shiori’s words, and ruffled his own hair. Alec and Linus, who knew their shared past, responded with somewhat pained smiles. Rurii gave Shiori’s leg a few reassuring pokes. With all this, Fanny seemed to realize that it was a unique relationship.

“Still,” she said, “that you fit in so well with everyone is proof of the hard work you’ve put in, no? To be honest, I’m...envious.”

The last words were spoken quietly, but they seemed to echo more than Fanny had expected. Alec and the others were silent in response—sorry looks filled their faces and they could do little more than shrug. Shiori clapped her gloved hands together, hoping to clear the uncomfortable atmosphere.

“Well, I’ll go ahead and make a place for everyone to sit,” she said.

Just as with the shorter breaks, Shiori crafted two benches and a table between them. Alec helped her to lay the furs over the benches.

“Thanks,” said Linus, chuckling as he lay back on one of the benches. “It is so nice to have a place to sit, let me tell you.”

Everyone reached into their knapsacks to take out something to eat. Shiori had also brought along some of her freeze-dried portable foods.

“I brought soup,” she said, “so there’s no need to use your own if you brought some.”

Shiori took out her favorite kettle and boiled some water with her magic, then put it on the table along with some wooden bowls. Alec and Linus were quick to reach out, putting the portable food in bowls and pouring the hot water in. Alec went with stir-fried eggplant, tomato, and beef, while Linus opted for sliced pork.

Fanny, who had been wrestling with a can of sardines, was shocked by what she saw.

“Wait... What?!” she exclaimed.

“Oh... Right.”

It was only then that Shiori remembered that it was Fanny’s first time traveling with them, and she smiled. Fanny took the bowl of root vegetable soup she’d been offered and stared at it.

“I knew it was something dried, but what is this...?” she uttered.

“It’s a ration of sorts. Freeze-dried foods are something we have back in my home country, and I’ve found a way to recreate it.”

Fanny looked very carefully at the wrapping that the portable food had come in, then gingerly brought the bowl of soup to her lips. She drank some of it, and after a moment of silence, her eyes grew wide with surprise.

“Amazing...” she said. “Delicious. What. How...?”

Fanny’s knightly tone of voice had vanished, leaving only her true impression. Alec and the others watched her with a mix of wry grins and pride.

“They’re light and easy to carry, and crafted to taste like something freshly made. I’d kill to have these as a part of field rations,” said Fanny. “Though I’m used to our regular rations now, we’re all sick of the biscuits and the dried foods, even when we’re lucky enough to have canned food with them.”

Fanny asked if the portable foods were mass-produced, and Shiori had to tell her that she made them by hand once a week and, at present, could only make enough to sell to her fellow adventurers. Fanny’s sheer dejection hit Shiori hard—even her fellow adventurers had asked if there wasn’t some way for her to make more. Unfortunately, however, Shiori had had to turn them down, even though it pained her to do so.

“You could always have a manufacturer handle things for you,” said Zack. “Though that in itself is easier said than done.”

“Yes, and I know it’s a very convenient option, but if you make even a tiny error in the storage process, then a little humidity can ruin everything... If I left this in the hands of someone who didn’t understand that side of it, I think it could be quite dangerous. That’s why even when I sell portable foods at the Guild I’m always reminding everyone to be very careful of humidity.”

There was another option—spending some of her savings and investing in magical equipment that could do the freeze-drying process for her. However, the process was slightly laborious—the rations had to be wrapped in wax paper and placed in a metallic airtight container—and it could be trouble if a lazier person bought up lots at a time. Shiori could see them being stored incorrectly and ending up going to waste.

“I see,” said Alec. “So you’d have to make sure you chose a manufacturer who would be considerate of those issues.”

“Right.”

Shiori didn’t even want to think of some careless manufacturer selling damaged goods that resulted in food poisoning, because all the blame would fall on the creator of the foods—Shiori herself.

This was all to say that, at least for the time being, it was easiest for Shiori to simply make them herself and sell them to her companions cheaply.

“What a pity...”

Fanny had dipped some of her bread in her soup and was now chewing on it dejectedly.

Wherever they went, it was always the same—people wanted to improve the food situation when it came to expeditions. This was no truer than with the knights. Though their training gave them basic training on cooking in the field, no emphasis was put on flavor—if it was warm, that was considered good enough. Being that the kingdom’s knights were made up largely of men and those of noble standing, the amount of actual cooks was noticeably limited. According to the knights that Shiori had met in Brovito Village, anyone who *could* cook was almost immediately moved into one of the more senior squadrons.

“I know some simple recipes where all you need to do is boil everything together,” Shiori said to Fanny. “Would you like them?”

The recipes were as easy as soups could get—no need to fry anything, and no need to worry about the order of what to cook when. All that was needed was to cut the ingredients up and add a few herbs and spices. It was hard to get wrong unless you tried to get creative with the flavoring.

“Please, I’d appreciate it,” replied Fanny, looking down at her soup and nodding.

The rest of the break was spent talking casually over what remained of their food.

“Well then, let’s get ready to get moving,” said Zack.

The party quickly prepared their things, and Rurii—who had been playing with the magical fire stone that it received in Silveria Tower—put the stone back in its body to prepare for the next leg of their trek.

“Shiori, how are you feeling? Good?” asked Zack.

“I’m fine, and I just drank another recovery potion.”

Zack was forever the worrywart, but Shiori wasn’t about to go saying that to his face. With time, she’d come to understand why he was so worried about her all the time.

After the Akatsuki incident, Zack hadn’t liked the idea of Shiori returning to the field. He told her she should rest and recover, and take a year off to do it. That was the extent of the toll the incident had taken on her. But Shiori had built herself back up and returned to work in just six months. Having survived such an ordeal, she was intent on living the rest of her life in health and safety, and to do so, she needed money. She had been almost obsessed with this idea, largely because she had lost almost everything she owned due to the Guild’s former master and her former party members.

Though in time, Shiori had recovered much of what she had lost or never received—her rightful portion of the reward money for her work, the promotions she should have earned, and the bonuses that came with them—the past had left her insecure, and she had desperately wanted to return to work.

Zack must have noticed it. He had prepared her a room and paid for her living expenses, and even said she could live in his care as long as she liked, as his sister. At the same time, he probably knew that she would never accept such conditions and, as it so happened, she declined his generous offer.

Zack had been in great pain over what had happened to Shiori, and before he’d let her jump back into the field, he’d told her, “Listen. You’re my sister. You can rely on me, whenever you need. You have the right to live however you want, and I won’t try to stop you. But please, just don’t forget—whenever times are tough, I’ll be right here for you. No matter how little a thing it is, you’ll always have a home here.”

And even now, Zack still worried about her. She had pushed herself to get back to adventuring, and he wanted to make sure she wasn’t putting any excess strain on herself. He was always worried that there might still be aftereffects.

“I’m fine, brother,” Shiori said. “If it gets to be too much, I’ll tell

you. I won't hide it anymore."

She would not hide her true feelings behind a facade.

Zack's breath caught in his throat at the sight of her serious, truthful gaze. But in the next instant, his lips curled into a grin and he wrapped an arm around her shoulder to give her a pat on the back.

It was a short back-and-forth, with meaning that only her companions truly understood. Fanny knew nothing of that deeper meaning, but she did not speak, and seemed to understand there were other circumstances at play. After looking at each of her fellow travelers, she lowered her gaze.

Zack gave Shiori a pat on the head, and then his expression turned serious.

"Right. Let's head out," he said. "We'll be entering the target's turf soon. We've got some time before they'll be awake and active, but there's still a chance they'll sense us coming. Be ready."

If anything sensed them and moved in to attack, it would most likely be the phantasm butterflies, which were extremely mobile. Shiori still had yet to actually see one, but they were said to be big enough that people shrank before them. Shiori took a deep breath and gulped—it dawned on her that they were entering a place where groups of the butterflies might attack.

Everyone kept their eyes ahead and trekked on. Shiori made to follow after them, but Alec stopped her. Thinking something was up, she turned to look at him and found his lips suddenly covering her own. Her eyes went wide with shock.

It all happened in an instant. Nobody even noticed it. Well—nobody except for a lone, wobbly companion, which paused and trembled.

"Well then, let's head off," said Alec.

He made no attempt to explain his actions. Instead, he took Shiori's hand and headed off after the others. She felt the warmth of his hand through his glove, and she placed her free hand against her lips, which still lingered with his heat.

His sudden and surprising show of affection was most certainly meant to lift her spirits. She cooled the billowing warmth in her chest, and let a smile cross her face.

6

After they had walked a few hundred meters into the carrion crawler turf, all signs of potential magical beast attacks came to a complete stop. They still had yet to encounter any crawlers or phantasm butterflies, but Shiori felt an unease creeping inside of her, causing her to shiver. There was no sign of the beasts yet, of course. It

was likely just the tension in the air that brought the feeling out of her. However, when they discovered tracks that showed the movements of a giant magical beast, it sent another tremble down her spine.

The overhanging branches of the trees had blocked some of the falling snow, but that which covered the ground had been gouged up in a way that seemed most unnatural—it was the mark of something huge having crawled through the snow. Alec and the others confirmed it soon after—the track belonged to a carrion crawler.

“Well, I guess if the tracks point in that direction, that’s the way we should go,” said Alec.

“Yep,” added Linus looking on ahead. “Should lead us right to the nest.”

However, once they’d walked another ten meters, the forest opened up into deep snow, and the tracks essentially vanished. The falling snow and the drifting wind had all but hidden the tracks from sight.

“Not so simple after all,” muttered Zack with a wry grin.

All the same, they at least had a general direction to follow.

“How far are we from the midpoint between the potential nest locations?” Zack asked.

“About a hundred meters,” said Alec, glancing at Fanny for confirmation.

“Yes, that’s about right,” she said, taking out her map just to be safe. “Yes—it’s close.”

“Erm... Now that we’re here, shall I use my search magic?” asked Shiori.

“Can you?”

Alec’s brow furrowed, but Shiori nodded.

“Yes. Unlike when we were looking for that lost child, now I have a general direction and a range to focus on. It won’t be as taxing as back then.”

“I see. But don’t push it if you don’t have to, okay?”

“Okay.”

Alec was worried, but Shiori assured him she would have a recovery potion handy in case she felt the effects of magical exhaustion setting in. His relieved sigh and wry grin told her she could go ahead, so she began spreading her search magic net.

“This is... Wow...” uttered Fanny.

Unlike Zack and Linus, who didn’t have magical abilities, Fanny was able to read the flow of magical energy.

Shiori made the spaces in her net long and stretched it out wide. She counted in her head as she did so, calculating a rough distance based on the speed of the creeping net. Even at five hundred, then six

hundred meters, however, she felt little more than the presence of smaller wildlife, and she let out a small sigh. Thinking that perhaps the carrion crawlers had already matured and were now above ground, she spread her net upwards. The results were no different.

Shiori let the spell dissipate and felt the exhaustion that came with it. She tried not to let it show on her face, but Alec still noticed.

“Did it wear you out? Are you okay?”

“I’m a little tired, but I think it might be more that I didn’t find anything.”

She told him that she hadn’t sensed anything in that direction, and he gave her a pat on the back—all that energy for no reward.

“But at least we haven’t wasted any time going in the wrong direction,” said Linus, looking on the bright side. “We would have lost a whole lot of time walking that same distance only to have to come right on back.”

Winters in the kingdom, especially at the end of the year, were very short on sunlight, and sundown came early. If they’d lost time going the wrong direction, it may well have been nightfall by the time they were back on track. None of them wanted to camp within range of the crawler nest. Battle was a more dangerous proposition in the darkness of night, and it was to be avoided where possible.

“That’s a good point,” said Alec. “Thanks to you, we’ve saved a lot of energy, and we’ll make sure that means you’re protected when we go into battle. Right now, however, we’re all leaning on you.”

Alec worried about Shiori, but he also truly understood her feelings. It was one of the reasons she loved him.

“Thanks, Alec,” she said. “I’ve become much more efficient with the search magic spell over time, so I don’t get quite as tired as I used to.”

It had been about a half a year since she started using her search magic, so in many ways it had only just been developed. When she had used it to find the lost boy, she wasn’t at all used to deploying it over a wide distance of hundreds of meters, and that incident had left her feeling very drained. But she’d used it quite a lot since then, and had since grown accustomed to controlling her magical output.

“I’ll be fine,” she said. “Once I’ve taken this recovery potion, I’ll search in the opposite direction.”

“Take your time.”

Zack was still worried, but he nodded, putting his trust in her. Shiori drank the potion that Alec passed to her, and after taking a deep breath, she once more cast her search magic. Much like the last time, she felt a few smaller presences, but the forest was otherwise deserted. Just as she reached the point where they expected to find a nest, she sensed something and let out a breath.

“I’ve got something,” she said. “It’s about five, six hundred meters away.”

“Carrion crawlers?”

“One second.”

Shiori focused her energy and spread her net out a little farther. She felt a number of large presences. They were very still, probably because they were asleep.

“Do you know how many there are?”

“Hm... Sorry, I don’t. There are a few all grouped in one place—I can’t tell them apart. But I’ve got one clump that might contain three or four, and then there’s a smaller mass not far from the first...”

Shiori lifted her search magic into the air, where she discovered more beasts.

“Oh. I’m reading something above the nest. There’s a lot more than on the ground.”

“So they *are* in a pack, then.”

Shiori did not know how many were carrion crawlers, and how many were phantasm butterflies. But...

“Generally speaking, anything above the nest is either a butterfly or a chrysalis,” said Alec. “Which means...”

“If we’re lucky, we’ll only have to take out a bunch of cocoons. If we’re unlucky, we’ve got some winged beasts to take down.”

If those butterflies came in to attack the group, that wouldn’t be an issue. However, if they flew away and fled, there was every chance they’d start propagating somewhere else. They needed to avoid that from happening at all costs.

Things were potentially worse than they had thought, and this cast a heavy atmosphere over the party. Zack, however, brushed this feeling away with a grin, and told Shiori she’d done a wonderful job pinpointing the nest so they wouldn’t have to waste any time.

“We won’t be able to make any attack plans until we have a better view of what we’re dealing with,” he said. “But you did a bang-up job, Shiori. I’m sorry if it left you tired, but thanks to you we’ve saved a lot of energy for the fight ahead.”

“Just glad I could help.”

She smiled at the praise from her brother, but her expression quickly grew pained—just as she’d said, the task had worn her out.

“Brother, do you mind if I take a short break?” she asked.

“Of course not.”

Zack took his pocket watch out and checked the time, then nodded.

“Can’t be too long, though. Thirty minutes, tops.”

“More than enough time. Thank you.”

Their last break would be thirty minutes, then. Everyone told her

she didn't have to bother going to the trouble, but Shiori still made a place for everyone to sit and passed around boiled water before gulping down another recovery potion. Then Alec laid a fur mat across one of the benches and Shiori lay down on it. He offered his leg as a pillow, and though the offer was extremely enticing, she politely turned it down on account of them being in front of everyone.

"For the love of everything holy, save that stuff for when you're at home," grumbled Zack, which brought a laugh out of everyone.

While the party sat around sipping at the warm water and chatting quietly, Shiori closed her eyes to let both her mind and her body rest. She felt the occasional touch of Alec and Rurii, and she was so grateful for companions who would give her this time.

The forest was completely silent save for the voices of her companions. There weren't even any bird cries. Occasionally, snow could be heard falling from the branch of a tree. It was eerily silent and peaceful, considering they would soon be going into battle with powerful magical beasts.

Shiori thought of the strength and kindness of her lover and of her brother. She thought of the kindness of her companions.

This was how things were with Akatsuki, at the start.

She could no longer remember the faces of her old companions very clearly, but she remembered the fun that they'd shared back when she first joined the party. She leaned on them, just as they leaned on her, and the party found balance.

It should have stayed that way, and yet at some point the relationship grew edgy. Her companions began treating her more and more harshly. Even though they'd gotten along so well, the infighting within the party grew. Shiori couldn't understand it—how had they changed so much in just six months? Why had they treated her so badly and ultimately tried to kill her? Even now she was not entirely sure. The mastermind behind it all was said to have been the Guild's former master, Ranvald. Was it due to his power and influence?

Shiori had no way of knowing for certain. The magical swordsman, Torre—who had always lied about them being lovers—was the only one left alive. All the other members were dead. Even Torre himself had run away to another guild, only to meet trouble and have his adventurer registration revoked. These days he was barely able to scrape by.

Shiori often wondered: why? Though some part of her wanted to ask, the rest of her never wanted to see Torre ever again. There was no longer any need, and Torre himself lacked the money to visit Tris just to explain himself. Similarly, Shiori felt no compulsion to make a trip specifically to see him either.

The incident was in the past, now. It was over. Shiori was left

with wounds on her body and mind, and lingering questions, but the incident was over. All that was left was to heal. And thanks to the presence of Alec, Shiori felt that she had, to some extent, achieved that.

“Time to wake up.”

Shiori opened her eyes to Alec’s low, gentle voice, and realized she’d dozed off.

“Are you feeling rested?” he asked.

“Yes. I feel lighter. Thank you.”

Everyone smiled in response. Even Rurii, who was eating a baked snack it must have gotten from Alec, wobbled by her feet.

“Thanks to you, I got a good rest too,” said Fanny with a smile. “Spirits are high.”

She’d taken advantage of the rest time much in the way Shiori had, and taken it very easy.

In the knight squadrons, men and women were treated as equals. They took the same breaks, ate the same food, and women were expected to do exactly the same training as the men. Their naturally weaker physicalities were not an excuse and were not forgiven. In this way, they were different from adventurers, who were more flexible when it came to responding to and compensating for everyone’s differences.

Naturally, there were positives and negatives to both approaches, and it was not a simple, clear-cut picture of one being better than the other.

“Knights find themselves fighting humans more than beasts,” said Fanny, “and female knights are often the first to be targeted. That’s why we have to do the same—if not even more—than the male knights when it comes to training.”

Even still, many of Fanny’s fellow male knights went easy on her in one-on-one training, which was perhaps part and parcel of the knightly mindset—many of them said that they were uncomfortable using their excess power to push around a woman.

However, their enemies would have no such reservations. This would not be so much of an issue if their enemies simply cut them down and left them for dead, but when a female knight was taken prisoner, the torture that awaited them was one that ripped away and slaughtered their dignity as women. It was for this very reason that many female knights subjected themselves to very strict training regimens to ensure they were not perceived as a weak link.

“The idea of filling in for one another’s weakness is not one you find very often among knights,” said Fanny. “It is very refreshing.”

“Even something that is a strength can become a weakness when looked at from a different angle,” said Alec. “If you have someone

who can complement that weakness, you let them fill it. Nobody is perfect, after all. Nothing beats supporting each other and working in combination.”

Adventurers were allowed to work in whatever way they pleased, and because of this, it was true to say that many of them were incapable of working in groups. Unlike knights, who as rookies trained together, learned all the same basic skills, and were then dispatched to squadrons, adventurers received comparatively little in the way of organizational education, and they approached battles in their own unique ways. At most, rookie adventurers received one-on-one lessons with an instructor in the appropriate class.

When you got to the middle ranks of adventurers, however, everyone knew how to fight in groups—they either worked it out themselves through experience, or someone taught them. Though it wasn’t widely known, those who could not work in teams never made it higher than B-rank—this was because at the higher levels, the majority of requests were for parties.

As everyone walked towards the carrion crawler nest, talking as they went, Shiori lowered her gaze and thought back to Akatsuki’s weak point.

Everyone in the party was strong. But for as strong as each member was alone, they were unable to fight in tandem with one another. One reason for this was that they had all become adventurers in their late twenties. Unlike younger adventurers, they’d spent more time among society and had found success doing things their own way—unfortunately, however, this resulted in excessive pride.

As a result, they did not listen readily to their fellow adventurers. There was little in the way of team strategy when they fought as a party, and outside of the leader and vice-leader—who came from the same hometown—everyone essentially fought on their own, in their own way. Sometimes this meant that Shiori’s fellow party members would freeze entirely when faced with a monster that was a bad matchup for them. Nobody looked to jump in to help make up for these weaknesses when they appeared, and nobody thought to play a healing or support role when they were of no use in combat. None of them knew how. What this meant was that the party hit a clear limit after which they were left unable to earn any further promotions.

None of them needed to throw away their pride, all they had to do was learn to work together.

Pride and arrogance. They appeared similar, and yet were very different. The members of Akatsuki had been arrogant. They had mistaken one for the other, and Ranvald Lumbeck—the Guild’s former master—had used this to tempt them, warping their hearts and their intraparty relationships.

“We’re nearing two hundred meters out. Everyone be on your guard,” said Zack.

Everyone readied themselves so they could respond to battle in an instant. They were close enough now that any particularly sensitive monster could potentially pick up a trace of them and spring on them in attack. It was important to limit the use of any magic with a significantly large output of energy. This included the magic they’d used to clear a path forward. Instead of fire magic, they switched to ice magic—instead of melting a path, they would harden one above the snow. It wasn’t nearly as easy to walk on, but it was something they’d have to endure for the time being.

“When we reach our destination, will you need me to clear the snow for battle?” asked Shiori.

“Depending on what we’re looking at, yes. In a best-case scenario, the monsters will have moved around enough that you won’t need to.”

Search magic gave off only a very weak magical signal, so it was likely that the magical beasts hadn’t noticed it. However, if Shiori did something as big as shifting the snow to clear space for her companions to fight, the beasts would almost certainly react. At the same time, if the snow was deep where the nest was, they’d have no other choice—fighting in deep snow was far too dangerous.

This was one of the difficulties that arose when fighting beasts in the winter. Parties had to be ready to secure space in which to fight at the same time as they launched their attacks—as such, difficult jobs like this were left only to the most experienced adventurers.

“Want me to go take a look?” asked Linus. “I can get a sense for the nest from a distance—I’ve got good eyes like that.”

As a former hunter in the wilderness, Linus had exceptional eyesight. He could make out different types of birds even as they flew the skies in the distance, and combined with his dynamic visual acuity, it was nothing to take lightly.

Zack thought for a moment, then nodded.

“Do it,” he said. “No need to overdo it, though.”

“Okay!”

They were about one hundred meters out from their destination when Linus told them he would survey the area ahead, and sped up, moving ahead of them. He knew where to step at a glance, and dodged any place where the snow was too deep. He even leapt off low-hanging branches to proceed further forwards, clearing the distance in no time.

“Wow, he’s like a *shinobi*.”

Alec couldn’t quite make out the word “shinobi” that Shiori had uttered without realizing it, and though he tilted his head in some confusion, he was equally as impressed.

“Whenever I see him like this, I can’t help but wonder if we’re only getting in his way.”

“You said it,” added Zack. “I’d heard he was fleet of foot, but that’s something else.”

Seeing the two men so quick to heap Linus with praise, Rurii wobbled an *I can do that!* and crawled smoothly across the snow. The adventurers responded with wry chuckles and kind smiles, and slowly walked on.

As they neared the dense presences of the magical beasts, they still didn’t pick up any aggression or murderous intent. Rurii, too, remained its usual lapis in color, which meant they were still safe.

Linus returned soon afterwards, and made sure nothing was following behind him before delivering his scouting report.

“They’ve made their nest up ahead among the alphanse trees. All the trees around the nest are bare—the leaves have been eaten.”

To maintain the strength of their huge bodies, however, the leaves of the nearby plants clearly hadn’t been enough for the crawlers. They’d eaten the nearby beasts and animals, then turned their sights on the highly nutritional “feed” around the town of Dima.

“The snow isn’t particularly deep,” continued Linus, “but you might have trouble getting a proper foothold if you’re not used to it. As for the numbers...well, that’s where it gets a bit annoying. Shiori’s search magic was bang on the money.”

“What are we looking at?”

Linus’s usually joyful face turned solemn.

“A lot of them have already turned into butterflies,” he said, “so there’s not actually that many crawlers. There are three crawlers in front of the trees, and there are eggs surrounding the tree roots—ten of them, from what I could tell. There are five cocoons on the tree trunks, and above them we’re looking at seven butterflies. In terms of variants, we’re looking at one crawler, two cocoons, and four butterflies.”

Shiori’s eyes went wide as Linus gave his detailed observations, but remained silent and listened until he finished. She went a little pale to hear that there were even more than he’d expected.

Alec and Zack looked at one another with furrowed brows and grumbles.

“Seven variants,” said Alec. “And three already taken care of around Dima. Ten in total. Not a number you can just ignore.”

“The damned variants are multiplying,” said Zack.

If they continued to propagate like this, the stronger variants would start outnumbering the ordinary beasts.

“Sir Gillis made the right call. If he’d been too concerned with pride and just waited, the forest would have turned into a variant

breeding ground.”

Carriion crawlers multiplying en masse in the forest was bound to end in tragedy. Once they’d eaten everything in the forest, they would have started on the trees themselves. With the forest mostly barren, it would be a long, long wait for it all to regrow, and being that the forest was where the town got a healthy portion of its resources, it might have ended up a matter of life and death.

Fanny looked troubled by Alec’s words.

“There was some hesitation,” she admitted. “There were some who thought it was best to wait for more knights to arrive.”

Carriion crawlers and phantasm butterflies weren’t bound to any one particular environment. The butterflies flew wherever the winds took them, after which they landed and laid eggs. However, the majority of these eggs became sustenance for local beasts before they had a chance to mature, leaving perhaps only one or two survivors. A pack of crawlers and butterflies was a decidedly rare sight.

That’s why, with a few of the crawlers already slaughtered, some of the knights might have thought they’d gotten all of them, if not the majority of them, and figured they could handle the rest on their own without adventurer assistance. But without any way to verify the numbers for sure, Gillis hadn’t been willing to take that risk.

It was either saving the face of the garrison knights, or putting the safety of the town first. And though as a knight Gillis of course had his pride, he had made a decision to ensure the safety of the town he watched over, including its local law enforcement. For him, the answer had been clear.

“Do the cocoons look close to hatching?” asked Zack.

“I won’t know until I get a closer look,” replied Linus.

“I see...”

Zack dropped into thought for a time, then looked down at Rurii, who had been quietly listening to the conversation.

“Figure I might as well ask, but I’m guessing you *don’t* eat those kinds of bugs, do you, Rurii?”

Rurii shook to express a decisive *Think about it for a second—of course the answer is no*. Everyone chuckled—it would of course be a stretch to expect the slime to swallow a six-meter-long magical beast whole. Zack grinned along with them and ran a hand through his hair.

“Sorry, don’t take it to heart—just thought I’d ask,” he said. “But we *are* looking at considerable numbers. I don’t want this to take any longer than it has to—I just figured if we had another surefire way of cutting down their numbers, I’d want to use it.”

“Might be a little annoying, but slow and steady will win this race,” said Alec. “It just comes down to how many we can take down with our first move. Those larvae have paralytic poison—getting bit

won't be pleasant."

"Not to mention the variants," said Linus. "We don't know *what* sort of poison they'll be carrying."

"Well, ideally we'd start by taking the variants down..." muttered Zack.

"Judging by the situation, we'll want to take out the butterflies first," declared Alec. "If any of those get away it's only going to be more trouble."

"Phantasm butterflies aren't particularly strong, but their scale dust can be a real problem," said Linus. "Our efficiency will drop with that stuff in the air, so let's pin down their wings or cut them out of the air—anything to keep them from moving."

"Which means that you lot with your long-distance attacks are on the butterflies," said Zack. "I'll take on the carrion crawlers. We'll regroup when we're done."

Fanny, who had been listening quietly as the party talked tactics, took this moment to speak up.

"Um, how about using soapy water?" she asked with a touch of hesitation. "I've heard it's effective for handling packs of bug-type magical beasts."

"Soapy water?"

The eyes of the party went from Fanny to Shiori, who was almost bowled over in shock.

"Erm, you mean my Bubbling Water Current, don't you? It couldn't be anything else..."

"Is that what it is called at the Adventurers' Guild? It was definitely a magic used by an adventurer against giant spiders. It was so effective that the knights adopted the tactic."

However, the exact amount of soap to use wasn't clear, and it sometimes wasn't effective depending on the size of the beast or pack. As demand for soap rose among the knights, manufacturers had to put a temporary halt on supplies. Within a month of the tactic being adopted, the knights had decided that soapy water should only be used for emergencies or especially large-scale suppression duties.

That said, in the forests and mountainous areas where bug-type magical beasts were more common, garrisons equipped each knight with two bars of soap for emergency use. Being that a few knights had even used the soap to get themselves out of tight spots, some took to carrying soap around as a kind of good luck charm.

Shiori was not sure how to respond to this revelation, and a half smile rose to her face. Alec, too, chuckled and scratched the tip of his nose.

This had all happened as a result of Count Enqvist and his servant getting lost in the forests near Tris. This was during the fall, when

Shiori had been pulled in to aid with the search. She, Alec, and Clemens had encountered a pack of giant spiders, and Shiori had taken care of them all with a combination of water magic and the soap she'd happened to buy while she was out shopping before all the commotion.

"It can sometimes have an adverse effect on other creatures in the area," said Shiori, "which is why I recommended not using it in large amounts..."

Perhaps the advice had been lost in the report that ended up in front of the knights' leadership, or perhaps they were simply more focused on the effects of the soapy water. Even if the pause in supplies was only for a short period, Shiori hadn't imagined that the knights would use it so much that their manufacturer would run out of stock. She felt something like a cold sweat at the realization that the tactic she'd come up with on the fly might have caused some trouble.

It was also quite the shock for Fanny to learn that the adventurer who had invented the tactic in question was in fact Shiori.

"A-Astounding! You discovered an incredibly powerful magic! Anyone can use it so long as they have soap and the ability to cast water magic. It's a monumental discovery!"

"Calm down now, Fanny," said Alec, gently keeping Fanny from pressuring Shiori out of sheer excitement. "After all Fanny has said, do you think it'll work here? I'm happy to try it if you think it'll be effective."

Alec seemed to be thinking in terms of raining soapy water down on the nest, but Shiori shook her head.

"I think it will be harder than that," she said. "Given the size of the magical beasts, we'll need more soap than we have on hand. And as I said before, using it over a wide area can harm the nearby flora and wildlife. Soapy water is toxic to bugs, which means it will kill off even the insects that are useful."

Shiori's Bubbling Water Current was convenient and useful, there was no doubt about that. On the other hand, it could be dangerous if it wasn't used carefully. Just as powerful magic could cause avalanches on snowy mountains, the seemingly harmless soapy water could pose other dangers. It was best to know this in order to understand when it was best to use the attack.

"And there *are* useful insects in these parts," said Linus.

"In Dima, definitely," added Alec, nodding.

"Right. Someone said there are bees in this forest, right?"

"Oh..."

Fanny realized then what would happen if there was a bee nest nearby.

"You're right," she said. "Most of the bees in these parts are

Trisflower bees, I've heard. They live all throughout the forest. There are also rarer bees that make a unique honey, and build nests underground to pass the winter. I can't remember what they're called, however..."

There was a chance that there were Trisflower bees in the area. There was also the possibility of the rarer bees that Fanny had mentioned. Then, there was the possibility that the crawlers had already eaten them...

"I mean, if we used the soapy water and said nothing, there's a chance nobody would notice, but..."

"Yeah. It's a valuable resource in these parts, so we can't risk it," said Zack.

"Right."

The idea of useful and harmful bugs was a human delineation. Whether to kill them or let them live, too, was a human decision. But just as magical beasts killed other creatures in order to survive, humans did the same. It was something that had to be accepted as unavoidable.

"Our priority is killing the dangerous magical beasts...is how I'd like to look at it, but nothing good's going to come from the residents thinking badly of the knights over something like this," said Zack. "If there's another way...that's what we should choose."

Fanny said she would write up and submit a report detailing the known problems of using soapy water for magical beast suppression. Storydia was a kingdom of farmers. Anything that adversely impacted their farming industry was best avoided.

"I'll write it up upon our return," she said. "I don't know how many other knights are using it."

"Great."

Thus the party decided against using the soapy water strategy.

"All right then, let's recap," said Zack.

Zack looked up to ascertain the position of the sun, checked his pocket watch, then turned towards the direction of the crawler nest. None of the magical beasts had noticed them yet. Rurii, too, had yet to turn its warning red.

"We'll leave the eggs and cocoons until last—start with the crawlers and the butterflies. Take down the variants first where you can, but don't make them a priority if it puts you in danger. Shiori, you'll kick-start things by securing an area for us to fight on. As soon as you do, I'll hit the nest. I'm on the crawlers. Alec, Fanny, Linus—you're on the butterflies. How you do things is up to you."

"Got it."

"Roger!"

"Rurii, you're Shiori's bodyguard. Shiori, if you get the chance,

keep an eye on things and support where you can.”

“Understood,” she said with a nod.

Rurii wobbled boldly by her feet.

“We want to focus on blocking the butterflies from escaping before taking them down,” said Alec. “Linus has his bow, and Fanny, you and I can aim our ice arrows at their wings. We want to stick them to the trees or knock them to the ground. As a general rule, no fire magic—flying sparks could cause problems.”

“Roger!” said Linus.

“Understood,” added Fanny.

“If the eggs or cocoons start to hatch during battle, we’ll deal with them on the fly,” said Zack. “They’ve got the numbers on us, after all. It won’t be easy, but stay aware of your surroundings.”

As far as tactics went, the strategy was simple. All they had to do was know their individual roles, and see them through.

But sometimes even that alone is difficult..

Even if Shiori was capable of attack magic, using it in a way that was helpful was another thing entirely. Alec and the others had developed experience and smarts over many years of battle. Shiori, on the other hand, had only three years plus the knowledge she’d brought with her from Japan. It was all she could do just to make sure she put those skills to good use.

But even then, here I stand. And I am here because they need me.

Learning to be confident was surprisingly difficult. But Shiori knew one thing for sure—she wanted to work hard so as not to shame her lover, who had chosen her as his partner, and her brother, who had told her she was essential to this request.

I will do my best.

Shiori took a deep breath—she could not allow herself to get overexcited.

At Alec’s gesture, they approached the nest.

7

The party was now about thirty meters out from the crawler nest—close enough to now make out the shapes of the beasts through the trees and falling snow. The agile Linus was in the lead, and he raised his hand to the rest of them to indicate he’d seen no problems.

“All right, let’s do it,” said Zack.

From here, they wouldn’t be using magic until they were in close proximity to the targets. Even if the magic itself could be mistaken as that of local wildlife, the actual dispersion of magical power at its time of release could not be disguised. The party also avoided using any tools that would result in excess noise.

Even in a winter as cold as this one, fresh yellow leaves still hung from the evergreen broadleaf trees, and it was the cover of one of these—where there was less piled snow—that the party aimed to make use of. Wherever the snow was particularly hard to walk through, Rurii took the initiative and deftly flattened it out. Everyone was prepared to whip out their respective weapons at a moment's notice.

They stopped about ten meters out, where Linus was waiting, and took off their knapsacks for ease of movement.

From this distance, the magical beasts were easy to see. There were two giant caterpillars colored a sober yellow-green, and one with a tint of silver running through it. The bare alphanse trees were indeed home to giant cocoons and eggs, and above them were the butterflies, most of them beautifully pink and spotted with blue, but a few of them glimmering with a rainbow reflection in the light. All of them had their wings closed, and were currently asleep. If any of them awoke and spread their wings, however, it was clear they would be at least the size of a small hut in terms of length.

But as unpleasant a sight as all the beasts were, the sheer size of them made them somehow easier for Shiori to deal with than ordinary bugs. At the same time, she was also aware that once they were awake and moving, her impression could easily change—still, she was more worried about her lover and her bug-hating brother, both of whom had no choice but to get up close and personal with the creatures.

That said, outside of a stern expression, Alec seemed the same as always, and Zack looked only a little paler than usual. It was amazing to Shiori that she could stand here in the presence of truly fearsome omnivorous magical beasts and yet still not feel like she was in any real danger.

“All right, everyone, just like we planned,” whispered Zack.

Gone was the easygoing face the man usually wore, replaced with that of a hardened warrior. The look in his blue eyes, too, was cold and sharp like a blade.

Everyone nodded. Without a sound, they unsheathed and readied their weapons.

“I’ll take the two in the center of the tree,” said Alec. “Fanny, you take the two at the bottom. Linus, can you take the three at the top?”

“No problem. I’ll be a little slower than you two, but they’ll all go down. The variants first, right?”

“Yep.”

Alec and Fanny readied their ice magic, while Linus readied his bow and put the sleeping butterflies in his sights.

“Shiori,” said Zack.

“On it.”

It was now Shiori's job to clear the ground upon which they would all fight, and to make a path to the battleground. Alec rested a hand on her back. She felt the warmth through his glove, and the corners of her lips turned up into a smile. A moment later, her expression hardened as she looked at the environment in front of her and pictured the path and open ground she wanted to craft.

"Here we go," she said.

Just as tensions were at their highest, Shiori cast her spell. It was a silent magic that required no words. The ice magic spread out from her feet, planing through the snow in front of her to form a path before flattening out the snow in the crawler nest and forming a wide square area.

The magical beasts felt the sudden change in the environment and turned their gaze on her, but Alec and Fanny's ice magic was already flying through the air along with Linus's arrows. Alec's thick ice projectiles plunged through two of the butterflies. One hit the joint where the wing connected to the butterfly, and as the wing came off, the beast fell to the ground. The other nailed a butterfly to the tree through its wing, where it remained, writhing.

Meanwhile, Fanny fired off a countless number of long, thin arrows like icicles, tearing holes in the butterflies' wings and forcing them to remain grounded. Linus, too, fired arrow after arrow, pinning the butterflies to the tree trunk.

"I'll take care of the beasts that have hit the floor!"

"Got it!"

"I'll keep working on the ones at the top of the tree!"

"Thanks!"

Linus readied another arrow as Alec and Fanny ran in. At the same time, Zack was of course readying his own attack, which he launched with a terrifying battle cry. He leapt in to face the crawlers with his sword raised high, and the sheer intimidation of this act seemed to take the two caterpillars completely off guard. It was an opportunity Zack intended to take full advantage of—he gave the sword over to the weight of gravity and with the strength of his first swing, sliced right through one of the crawlers, sending its insides flying across the ground. Then, he swung the sword back in another slice, killing the beast with his first two attacks.

Shiori, who was hiding in wait in the shadow of a tree, was stunned by the power of the S-rank adventurer. He had struck the crawler's weak point. This was not an easy task—it was one thing to know where it was, but it was another entirely to hit it.

"Amazing," she uttered. "That's an A-rank beast and he treated it like a plaything..."

The two crawlers were dead in almost an instant, which left only

the variant. Still, amidst the battle he did not forget to glance in Shiori's direction to ensure her safety. Alec, too, did the same.

Fanny had her hands full and was unable to consider much else besides the phantasm butterflies. But this was not to say she couldn't keep up—there was very little wasted movement in what she did.

Alec and Fanny quickly took care of the butterflies that were struggling upon being pinned, then turned their attention on the butterflies farther up the tree.

"Yes! Got one!" cried Linus, standing just a little ways in front of Shiori.

"Great job," replied Shiori.

"Thank you! On to the next!"

Linus readied his bow to target the next butterfly.

"Those butterflies sure are hard to hit, with their thin bodies and that fluttering movement," he muttered.

Still, Linus had only missed two of his shots—it was clear that he held himself to very high standards.

"Everyone's amazing," uttered Shiori. "If I even tried to support you all, I'd only get in the way."

The ferocious offense of the party had very quickly put the magical beasts on the back foot and cornered them. It seemed that Shiori wouldn't even have to do a thing.

"Oh no!" cried Linus suddenly. "They're tearing their own wings off!"

Immediately after firing and connecting with three consecutive arrows, two of the phantasm butterflies seemed to signal to one another, twisting their bodies viciously. But they were not simply writhing in pain—their movements had intent. Shiori and Linus watched as the wings which were impaled were torn from the butterflies' bodies. They would not grow back. But this was a matter of survival—or more accurately, a matter of protecting their children or siblings. The butterfly variants would sacrifice their wings simply to escape.

It was impossible to know what the butterflies were targeting, but Shiori got the sense they were heading in her direction, and she felt a chill crawl up her spine—indeed, the variants aimed for the tree where Shiori, Linus, and Rurii were.

"Look out! It's heading right for you!"

Almost as soon as Alec shouted, the other butterfly's wing snapped with the sound of fabric being ripped through with a blade. The two butterflies now limped through the air, incapable of smooth flight.

It was impossible to know which direction they would move in, and aiming became suddenly difficult. One of the butterflies weaved through the magic and arrows flying for it and then, exhausted,

wrapped around the other and crashed into a nearby tree. In an instant, glimmering dust filled the air. Shiori realized then that the butterfly hadn't been exhausted at all—it had deliberately slammed into the tree to send this dust flying.

“Cover your nose and mouth!” shouted Zack as he finished off the last crawler with a powerful swing of his sword. “Don't breathe any of the dust in!”

The scale dust from the butterflies was not in and of itself toxic, but breathing it in induced uncontrollable coughing and sneezing. The dust was anything but pleasant, and it interfered with a person's ability to concentrate.

Shiori whipped her sleeve up to cover her nose and mouth, but she had already breathed in some of the dust. For a moment she felt as if she had inhaled a powder of some sort, but in the next instant she heard a strange buzzing sound and the world around her lost focus. Everything looked like a watercolor painting, and the outlines of her friends and the beasts around her went cloudy.

It was a type of illusion magic. The dust was simply the medium for it to reach its targets and take effect.

The world was still hazy, but then there came the sharp, clear sound of something fracturing. It happened twice more.

“The eggs are hatching!”

This was Zack's voice. Her companions were now relying on their ability to sense what was around them to keep up the offensive—wielding ice magic, arrows, and Zack's great sword.

That was the reason that the two butterflies had launched their sacrificial assault—to force the adventurers' attention away from the eggs. The shells continued to break, and Shiori turned her eyes away from the dim sight. Her vision went hazy just a few meters in front of her, and it was so bad she could only make out who was who by their outline and colors.

“Have to...do something...about this dust!”

As the shells of the eggs broke, there came a shrill cry like metal scratching on metal, and then the cries multiplied. The recently hatched larvae came with paralysis poison, and Shiori was suddenly hit with the thought of them all being attacked by starving larvae while their vision was still blurry.

Alec and Zack, who were both the best of the best among the Tris Guild's adventurers, would not let the dust stop their attacks, but it was sure to have an impact over a long enough time. She was also worried about Linus and Fanny—they were covering their mouths and noses to avoid the dust, but in that state they'd quickly run out of breath.

As two of the larvae approached—and were swiftly absorbed by

Rurii—Shiori covered the battlefield with her magic, creating a wind current to carry the dust and bury it in the nearby snow—this would stop it from floating up into the air again.

It worked like a simple air purifier, and fortunately it was just as effective as she'd hoped. It was also fortunate that the amount of dust wasn't as high as it could have been, since the butterflies had needed to sacrifice one wing in order to make use of the other.

Shiori's vision soon cleared, but to be extra certain, she kept an antidote potion in hand as she lowered her sleeve and took a breath. It was safe.

“Awesome work, Shiori!”

Linus gave Shiori a thumbs-up and winked. He and Fanny had teamed up to take down the wounded butterflies. And now that things were clear, he shouted at Alec and Zack.



“Master Alec! GM! The dust is clear!”

Neither Alec nor Zack replied as they swept through the crawler larvae, but as they lowered their sleeves and went on with their attacks, faint smiles could be seen upon both of their faces. They went on killing the larvae that were still attempting to hatch, rendering them powerless, and Linus and Fanny moved in to help. Shiori ran over to them when they were done, making sure to avoid looking directly at the beast corpses that filled the battlefield.

From the ground up, there were around thirty eggs forming an uneven line some 1.5 meters up the tree.

“If all of these hatched safely and grew into adults, it would be serious trouble.”

“Usually most of them get eaten by other beasts before that even becomes a possibility,” said Linus.

A number of the crawlers had escaped the knights’ usual extermination patrol and, fortunately for them—though unfortunately for the rest of the forest—they’d been able to mature and grow to the point where they became trouble for not just the forest, but the nearby town too.

After finishing off the last egg, Alec wiped the muck from his sword and placed it back in its scabbard. The nest was a miserable sight now that the battle was over. Outside of the cocoons, however, it seemed that all of the crawlers and butterflies had been accounted for.

“And we’re done!” said Linus.

“And glad for it,” added Fanny.

Rurii trembled by their feet—it had probably wanted to take part in the battle itself, but had instead fulfilled its protection duties without fail. Shiori decided that she would reward it with as much hot water as it wanted later, and went to see Alec and Zack.

“Great work, Shiori,” said Zack.

“That’s my line,” said Shiori with a grin.

“You played your part too,” said Alec.

Shiori had escaped with only a showering of scale dust, but Alec and Zack—who had gotten up close and personal with their foes—were a mess.

“Bringing Shiori was the right call,” said Zack. “Look at us.”

“We’ve both seen better days. The last thing I want to do is spend the night like this, even if that used to be just part and parcel of the job.”

Alec grimaced as he flicked away some of the muck still stuck to his armor.

“I’ve still got dust stuck to my gear,” said Linus.

“I am even more excited to see this bath magic of yours, Miss

Shiori,” said Fanny.

“In that case, I’ll get one ready just as soon as we decide on a campsite,” said Shiori, her words brightening everyone’s expressions.

Zack, however, frowned for a moment and looked up.

“Before that, we have to take care of *them*,” he said.

Zack was eyeing the cocoons hanging from the branches of a big tree. Unlike the eggs, these had yet to hatch. Alec put a finger to his jaw in thought.

“You can get threading from those cocoons, if I remember correctly,” he said. “It’s best if we can kill the beasts inside without damaging the cocoon itself.”

“Wish it was as easy as cooking them on the inside with magic, but...it’s actually not. If you get the temperature wrong, it can harm the quality of the threading.”

Linus knew this because he’d grown up in a village that handled silken thread.

“They say the cocoon of a variant is worth a lot on account of its color,” said Zack. “We might not be able to salvage anything particularly lengthy because of the damage to it, but...if you sold all of it, it would make up for some of the town’s damages, no?”

Unfortunately, none of the adventurers or Fanny knew the correct temperature for boiling the cocoons, so they could only chuckle and shrug. Rurii, too, mimicked everyone’s tilted heads by tilting its own body.

“Well then, we’ve got no choice,” said Alec. “We’ll have to put holes in the cocoons, but we’ll do it with our swords.”

“Good call.”

“Allow me to help,” said Fanny.

“In that case, I’ll create places for you to stand,” said Shiori. “It won’t be particularly wide, unfortunately.”

“Anything is better than nothing,” said Alec. “Much easier than having to climb.”

The cocoons were about forty meters above them. Shiori gulped down a magical recovery potion, then focused on the roots of the tree and cast her ice magic. The adventurers watched as she crafted a spiral staircase out of snow.

“I did my best to make it sturdy, but whoever goes first, please be careful all the same.”

“Got it. Thank you, Shiori,” said Alec.

“Wow...” uttered Zack. “I like this. Takes away all the pain of climbing.”

“You’re so deft and accurate...” said Fanny.

The three of them then began working their way up the tree on the staircase. Shiori watched them go and drank another recovery

potion. Making anything particularly big always took a toll on her.

"You doing okay?" asked Linus.

"This much is fine," replied Shiori. "As long as I keep my magic levels up, it doesn't have an impact on my physical condition."

"I see. But don't go pushing it, yeah?"

"Okay."

Shiori returned Linus's smile and looked back up at the tree. Alec had made it to a point just underneath the cocoons, and they were carefully working out the best place from which to attack so as to cause the least damage. When they were done, Alec slid his sword into one of the cocoons. He hadn't applied any fire or lightning magic this time, perhaps to limit any damage caused by burning it. After a third thrust of his blade, he made sure that the creature within the cocoon was dead, then removed his sword.

Zack then informed Fanny where she ought to strike the cocoons from. She nodded as he pointed to a spot which she impaled on her long sword. Zack made sure it looked good, then did the same to the next cocoon himself, killing the butterfly within.

When the last cocoon stopped emitting any signs of life, Shiori felt as though she could finally relax, and the tension flooded from her shoulders. All the same, Shiori's whole role in the party became salient from this point, so as Alex and the others made their way down the stairs, she joined them, silently putting herself in work mode.

"A little bit more and then we're done," said Zack. "We need to gather proof of suppression and do an inspection of the beasts. We'll leave the cocoons as they are, but...let's take an egg shell and a crawler feeler, plus a butterfly wing."

"I'm on it," said Alec.

"Me too!" said Linus, chiming in. "I'll grab anything worth selling while we're at it."

"You're the best, Linus," said Zack.

"Do you mind if I use a little time to take notes for my report on the request?" asked Fanny.

"Not at all," replied Zack. "In that case, come help me with the inspection. I want to record the details too."

"Understood."

With everyone's duties set, the four set off to see to their tasks. Shiori opted to assist Alec and Linus. The cocoons, which were the raw material from which the threading could be gathered, were too large to carry back to town, so they were left as they were—more experienced people would come to gather them at a later date. Now that the danger in the area was gone, the party decided it was better to leave the cocoons to the townsfolk that knew best how to handle them, rather than potentially damaging them in their attempts to

bring them back. They decided to do the same for the egg shells—they merely gathered a few bigger pieces as proof that they had completed their task.

“These shells are used for bricks,” Alec told Shiori.

“Oh? Really?”

“Yep. They’re strong at low temperatures and they don’t freeze. As a bonus, they retain a lot of heat. For that reason, they’re crushed up and mixed into bricks, which makes them a perfect material for home insulation. The fact that they don’t freeze also means they’re great as paving materials...well, that’s what the experts say, but unfortunately it’s not easy to gather in large quantities. Because of that, most of the shells get bought up by wealthy eccentrics.”

“Wow...reminds me of scallop shells.”

Scallop shells were discarded in great numbers in Japan, and so they were repurposed as both paving material and as anti-icing agents. That said, given the cost, there was still much room for research and development.

Alec chuckled as Shiori told him about it.

“Looks like the countries and races might differ, but human beings will think along the same lines regardless,” he said.

“Seems like it.”

In this way, the adventurers went about their work, chatting easily with one another.

“You know, that scale dust sells for a pretty good price too,” said Linus. “But how are you supposed to gather it all? Actually, come to think of it, usually you can’t.”

Linus was gathering some feelers as he spoke—they were used in antidote potions. Phantasm butterfly scale dust was used in paints, pigment colors, makeup, and artificial pearls. Glossing agents often came from water-based magical beasts and butterflies, but phantasm butterfly dust was rarer, and thus sold for a higher price.

“Well, at least we can take the wings back with us...” he muttered.

“They certainly spread quite a lot of dust around, didn’t they?” added Alec.

It would have been possible to take back the earth and snow and have the dust sifted from it, but the transportation and preparation costs made this unfeasible.

“But I collected it all,” said Shiori. “I did so when we were fighting.”

“What?!”

Alec and Linus both turned to Shiori in surprise.

“I thought it would be a problem if it all landed somewhere it could get in our way, so I put it all in one place, in the snow.”

Shiori took them to where she’d done it. She’d used the wind

magic like a vacuum, gathering all of the scale dust in a small cavity in the snow. The two men chuckled in disbelief.

“Wow. Amazing stuff...” muttered Linus.

“Yep... And it looks like it’ll all fit in a big bottle too,” added Alec.

Even now, it gave Shiori the shivers to think that so much of the dust had been floating around during the battle. Still, it was too valuable to simply leave as it was, so Alec neatly gathered it into a bottle.

“Painting material...and pigments” muttered Shiori, her brain making a link between thoughts—glossy materials, paint, pigments, art supplies...

“Oh,” Shiori said, looking at Alec’s hands as she thought of her friend. “Alec, do you think *I* could buy the scale dust?”

“Hm? Why? You want it?”

Alec blinked in surprise at the amount of interest Shiori was displaying.

“Yes. I thought it might be nice to send to Annie.”

There was a part of Shiori that wondered about sending magical beast materials to a noble woman from an esteemed family, but it was used in pigment colors, and there was every chance that the margravine would be able to put it to good use.

Not to mention, there was the fact she seemed very interested in magical beast materials, anyway...

Shiori didn’t actually know if it would provide the woman with any inspiration, but when she thought of how badly Annelie wanted the is groda’s poison sacs—and how much it had bothered her lover, Dennis—she couldn’t help but laugh.

“I see,” said Alec. “Well, I don’t think you need to buy it. We’ll split it up and you can take some of it.”

Of course they would have to confer with Zack and Fanny, but it wasn’t likely that anyone was going to object to Shiori taking a small amount of the dust.

The scale dust had a beautiful, elegant glow, and it entranced Fanny too. They tried to give some to her in the split, but she turned them down, saying that she had come here on part of her duties, and as such was not permitted to take anything home. But even as she spoke, it was clear she wished it were not so.

Shiori looked at Alec and Zack, and the three nodded. Shiori put some of the dust in a small bottle and held it out to Fanny.

“In that case, consider this a gift, to mark the first time we worked together. You’re allowed to accept gifts, I assume?”

For all intents and purposes, it was a personal gesture. And though some might have perceived it as a kind of bribe for future services or favors, nobody would think that way when the person

receiving it was a knight, and the group giving it was an experienced party led by an S-rank adventurer.

Fanny seemed shocked by the gesture. But as she looked down at the bottle placed in her hands, her face opened into a bright smile like a flower blooming. Her silver hair wavered, sparkling with the dust that had gotten caught in it during the battle.

“Thank you so much. I’ll treasure it.”

The dull light of the sun through the winter clouds shone through to the bottle, and Fanny grinned at the sight of dust glimmering within. She put the bottle carefully into a pouch on her waist with a look of great joy.

It was true that they were in a place strewn with the corpses of fallen magical beasts, but the air was still filled with a sense of peace and ease as everyone went about finishing their jobs.

“Right, that’s my inspection done and dusted,” said Zack putting his notebook back in his chest pocket. “How are you doing over there?”

“I’m done too,” replied Fanny, having written down everything of note.

“I’m done,” added Alec.

“I’ve gathered all the spoils,” said Linus, patting a leather bag filled with magical beast material. “Good to go!”

Rurii, who had been lost in playing with an egg shell, trembled with satisfaction.

“Looks like we’re all set then,” said Zack. “Tremendous work, everyone! Now we just have to make the return trip. Let’s find a place to set up camp.”

Their suppression task was complete. Now all that was left was to camp for the night, then report back to town. They couldn’t let their guards down yet, but all the same they felt a weight lifted from their shoulders—it felt good to bathe in the warm feelings of a job well done.

“Fanny, if you know a good place for a campsite, would you mind leading the way?” asked Zack. “And please, make it somewhere Shiori can set up a bath.”

Everyone laughed at Zack’s words, and Fanny smiled.

“Leave it to me!”

The party first tied cloth to nearby trees to make the location easy for others to find later, then everyone followed Fanny as she led them to where their campsite would be for the evening.

walk downhill from the carrion crawler nest. She'd had two locations in mind, but only one of them was suitable—that is, spacious enough to accommodate a party of five with a slime, and manageable in terms of piled snow. The other place was bigger in terms of space, but because the nearby trees were entirely bare, there was far too much snow, making it unsuitable for a bath. For the party, the bath was their top priority, so the decision was unanimous—they'd take the slightly cramped location in exchange for it.

Just to be on the safe side, Shiori ran her search magic under the ground to ensure there were no bees in hiding, then crafted a splendid bath within the tent that was erected for it.

“Oh...this is truly like a dream.”

Fanny let out a deep sigh of admiration. There was nothing like this—she'd washed her body of scale dust, soaked in the bath to warm up, changed into a clean set of clothes, and then been given a hot meal to boot.

In cold areas like this one, a simple case of wet clothes could quickly become fatal, so while all knights were made to carry a change of clothes, bathing and washing was not something done while out in the field. Shiori, however, did the washing when she found the time between dinner preparations. Laundry magic and drying magic—both of which being spells utilizing combination magic—were truly impressive. The food Shiori prepared, too, was both hot and wonderfully tasty, and leagues beyond field rations. This was the kind of service that one might expect for nobles on traipses through the outdoors. Steam wafted from the lamb and root vegetable soup, and the Eastern-style sautéed pork with golden brown aromatic sauce was truly delectable.

Having now seen for herself Shiori's housekeeping mage skills at work, Fanny lavished her with praise. Under normal circumstances, she'd be exhausted after trudging through the snow and doing battle with creepy magical beasts, and yet instead she felt refreshed. When she said as much to the adventurers, they laughed.

“If there were one housekeeping mage per knight battalion, morale among knights would be completely different,” she exclaimed.

When she mentioned it would probably impact the chances of success for dangerous missions, and survivability rates among knights, the adventurers told her she was exactly right. Shiori's face flushed red and she gave a simple word of thanks while she sipped at her soup. Alec, by her side, smiled as if it were he who was being praised.

When Fanny had first met Shiori, introduced to her as a member of an S-rank party, she'd been shocked. The woman was so short and delicate of frame that Fanny had at first assumed her to be a young girl. Closer up, she had determined the mage to more likely be in her

mid to late twenties. She seemed younger than her companions, was a woman, and on top of that was clearly an immigrant that had earned the acceptance of her peers. In fact, what surprised Fanny even more was how important she obviously was to them.

There were a greater number of female adventurers than female knights. But even then, the profession was still very male-dominated. Shiori bewildered Fanny—she existed in a society upon foreign land, but was accepted by local adventurers as one of their own. She was markedly different from Fanny herself. Fanny thought of their meeting as good fortune.

Gillis had thought—and said as much—along the following lines: “I intend to send you along with the adventurers, but depending on who arrives, we might choose somebody else.” He wasn’t going to put a female knight among a group of adventurers if they came off as shady or suspicious.

Fanny had never hated being a woman. And though she was used to the kinds of considerations people made because she was, it still irked her whenever her gender was thought of as a weak point or deficiency of some sort.

“A young woman shouldn’t be sticking her neck into a man’s world. And what good is it for you if you end up all scarred like that?”

She’d heard grumblings and complaints like this one many times over the last few months, always from the town’s older citizens. And it was true that when she’d announced her desire to become a knight, her friends and parents were against the idea. She’d been raised in an ordinary household, and though she was allowed to follow her own wishes, everyone expected that in the end she’d give up and come back home. Instead, Fanny had gritted her teeth and gotten results, and earned her position among an almost entirely male class. She was now recognized for it—by her peers, her seniors, and her captain.

She had not expected to be thought less of by those she was now assigned to protect. She had learned the hard way that no matter how hard she worked, there were some people that were never going to accept or recognize her—not even if she, Fanny Edin, had chosen to devote her life to protecting her nation and its people.

That’s why I want to know...how did Shiori gain everybody’s recognition in a country that is not her own?

Fanny glanced at the housekeeping mage—at her lustrous black hair and the depth in her eyes, which thinned as she let a gentle smile fill her face. She seemed to glow with a mysterious luminescence.

It was late in the night, and Fanny sat by the campfire on guard duty, sipping at restorative herb tea while she looked at Shiori. The housekeeping mage had her notebook and a portable bestiary open

and was focused on scribbling notes into them. Both books were worn from use, and it was very clear that Shiori was studious. By her side, the slime Rurii had relaxed into a wide puddle as it slept.

Fanny waited for Shiori to finish. After a time, Shiori let out a breath, then closed the books and put them in a pouch. Fanny held back from speaking straight away—she didn't want Shiori to know she'd been watching her this whole time—and gave it a minute before venturing into conversation.

"What were you writing?" she asked.

Fanny threw the harmless question out because she didn't want to appear too pushy, and Shiori let that same strange smile grow upon her face as she turned towards the knight. According to an acquaintance she had at the kingdom, this smile was unique to Eastern people—it was one that didn't express too much emotion, but wasn't entirely expressionless either.

"Just what happened today, and things I learned for the first time," said Shiori. "All sorts of things. Some of the beasts today I'd never seen before, so I wanted to make some notes for the next time I potentially encounter them."

"You're very conscientious."

"I'm barely more than a rookie, so I spend every day trying to catch up to the others."

As fate would have it, the conversation naturally rolled into the very subject that Fanny wanted to ask about.

"Rookie, you say?" she asked, leaning forward.

"Hm...well, perhaps not quite, but it's only been three years since I became an adventurer, and there's still so much I don't know. At the same time, I'm getting more opportunities to work with seasoned adventurers, so I don't want to be left behind."

Three years. In just three years, Shiori had gotten to the point where she was being invited into an S-rank party. But Fanny knew, from having spent even just a day with her, that Shiori was very intelligent. She was resourceful. At first, Fanny had thought it was innate, but Shiori had explained—with something of a wry chuckle—that she was only of average intelligence back at her home. Still, she worked at least twice as hard as any other. Her notebooks looked like they had been used for many long years, and all the tags sticking out from her bestiary told the tale of its use. She worked hard so that everything she learned could be put to use when the opportunity next presented itself.

Fanny, too, had always tried to put in her best effort. And yet, all the same, the people of Dima refused to recognize or acknowledge her. But after seeing the effort that Shiori had put in over just three years, her own efforts as one of this nation's people seemed like a

trifling thing.

“I guess I’m still lacking in just that...effort,” muttered Fanny.

But Shiori had heard her. Her dark eyes flickered with light.

Fanny wondered: *Perhaps she will tell me if I ask. Am I not trying hard enough? Do I need to put in more effort?*

“What can I do to be recognized the way you are, Shiori?” Fanny asked. “Am I...not trying hard enough?”

“What can you do...?”

Shiori tilted her head, then smiled. There was something pained in the expression.

“In my case, I was desperate just to build myself a stable life in this country,” replied the housekeeping mage. “I never even considered the idea of people recognizing or acknowledging who I was. I simply didn’t have the luxury. I didn’t know the language here, and I didn’t have a single coin to my name.”

“Oh...”

Shiori spoke as if this were daily conversation—as though it was simply something that had happened. Still, Fanny could not help thinking of the sight she had decided to ignore—that of the scars that covered the mage’s arms, as she’d entered the bath. Fanny hadn’t been sure where to look at the time. The scars, the complete lack of language ability and money...all of it made Fanny think of one word: slavery.

However, though Fanny was curious about Shiori’s origins and her journey to Storydia, she was told nothing of it. All she knew was that Shiori no longer knew how to get home, or if she even had a home to return to, and so she had made the decision to stay and make a living here.

She had learned the local language to carve out a life for herself, and she had learned the culture of this place—its food and way of life—to better fit in. More recently, as her adventurer rank increased, she was learning the ways and customs of the nobility—this being because more jobs for them were becoming available to her.

Learning so as to blend in. Learning so as to better understand others. This idea seemed to strike a chord with Fanny.

“But, as I worked the best I could, little by little it started to bear fruit,” continued Shiori. “I made friends, my work was praised, and before I knew it people had come to accept me...though I only realized that quite recently.”

“Before you knew it, huh...?”

“Yes. But the world is full of all sorts of people, and even now some of them don’t accept me. But I can’t do anything about that. Some people just don’t get along with anyone.”

Fanny thought of Dima’s elderly.

“I understand the logic of what you’re saying, but doesn’t it frustrate you when people don’t acknowledge your hard work? Your efforts?”

“Of course it does,” said Shiori, her calm expression twisting with a hint of sadness. “I’ve been told as much to my face, and it’s very frustrating. But just as I have a lifestyle and thoughts of my own, so too do the people who say such things. Sometimes there’s simply no middle ground. Yes, it’s a problem when a person’s dislike for you results in harm, but as long as it doesn’t...I do my best to pay it no mind. Human emotion is rarely a thing ruled by logic.”

Changing another person’s mind was no easy task. What it often came down to was a matter of compromise.

“That’s not to say I don’t worry about how other people think of me, but I’d prefer to live my life, and to have people around me who recognize that. And if I can be a part of the lives of people like that, well...I’ve just decided that makes me so much happier.”

Rather than grinding her mental health to the bone trying to get along with the people who didn’t acknowledge her, Shiori took joy in living a life that involved the people who accepted who she was.

It was a way of respecting conflicting opinions—or perhaps, a kind of passive acceptance of them. There were not very many with the power to change a person’s mind. And if they were not someone important, trying to do so was largely a pointless endeavor. All the same, Fanny herself did not have that power or strength of will. However, at the very least, she could choose to live a life that was true to herself, and she could do that immediately.

“And then in our case you’ve got our captain...I don’t know if you’d call him too rigid or too conscientious, but...he’s drawn a line between us and them and he won’t budge on it.”

The words of her fellow knight scratched at Fanny’s mind.

Perhaps, some of the problem lies with us.

Seeing the world in black and white, drawing lines around what you would allow—in many ways, these terms simply indicated a lack of trust in people. Shiori had told her that she’d learned the language, the culture, and the customs of Storydia in order to live as a part of it. Learning to live in a place with an entirely different language was something that required considerable effort, but in return for it she had earned the trust and acceptance of those around her. It wasn’t something they had simply given her.

Acceptance... Hm.

Shiori was different from Fanny in terms of both position and circumstance—while Shiori was an immigrant who’d had little choice but to learn about Storydia in order just to live, Fanny was a knight who was born and raised as a Storydian citizen. At the same time, she

felt there was much to take away from the route that Shiori had walked to achieve what she now had.

The campfire crackled, and as Fanny watched the dancing embers dissipate into the sky, she thought of how beautiful they were, and felt a weight lifting from her heart.

9

There was no snow the following day—instead, the sky was blue with a few scattered clouds. The magical beasts had been their main cause for concern, but with the job done and a good night's sleep behind them, the party was in high spirits and high energy—they headed back towards Dima with pep in their step. And though they encountered a few starving magical beasts on the path back to town, they were nothing to a party as powerful as this one. Thanks to a gentle downhill slope, the walk back was easier than when they'd left, and Shiori's group reached the outskirts of the forest by noon.

"Let's hope nothing is out of the ordinary in these parts," said Fanny.

Fortunately, everything seemed fine, and so the party headed for the gates of Dima. A little ways into their walk they saw a single horse riding towards them—a knight out on patrol.

Fanny lifted a hand in greeting and the horse slowed down until it came to stop before them. The man on the horse jumped off with a smile—it was one of the knights they'd met at the cafeteria.

"Fanny!" he said. "I'd guess by that look on your face that everything went swimmingly."

"It did. But we owe it all to these adventurers."

Fanny gave a quick report and exchanged pleasantries with the knight, who then told them he'd arrange for a carriage and sped on back the way he'd come. Not long afterwards, a carriage appeared, and the adventurers hopped aboard gratefully and rode the way back to Dima.

Gillis had heard the report and so was waiting to meet them all when they arrived. Just as when they'd gotten to Dima the previous day, he led them to the reception room, where he brewed some tea and passed it around. He let out a sigh of relief once he heard their report and inspected their proof of completion. He'd gone a little pale when he learned that the variants had already started multiplying, but he was happy to hear that they'd all been vanquished.

"Thanks to your hard work, we won't have to worry about a variant outbreak," he said. "We'll be able to sleep in peace for a little while."

It seemed that the townsfolk had been on his case again as of that

very morning. Gillis said he'd inform the town mayor immediately, but then his face grew a touch troubled.

"That said...even with that precious material waiting for us, sending out people to collect it is going to take a considerable amount of time. Considering gathering and adventurer costs, things could get a little tight for the townsfolk, and they've already suffered damages."

The room dropped into silence. Shiori looked up at Alec, who seemed to have something on his mind as he watched Gillis. Finally, he spoke.

"I apologize if I'm poking my nose too far into town politics, but wouldn't it be better to send the townsfolk themselves instead of going to the effort of hiring adventurers?" he asked, his voice quiet and gentle. "I understand that this particular suppression request would have been far too much for them, but with the danger now gone, what harm is there in leaving the material collection to the townsfolk? With local law enforcement you at least know some of those people can handle themselves, right? And if you're worried, you can always send a knight or two with them."

"Yes, but..." said Gillis, somewhat hesitant. He shook his head. "I can't. I cannot allow the townsfolk to be put in danger."

The knights were there to protect the populace, and the responsibility for managing the squadron landed on Gillis's shoulders. Shiori could understand his position, but she also knew it would be impossible for him and his garrison to shoulder the entirety of Dima's needs. There was a clear limit to their capabilities.

Even during the snow wolf attack in Brovito, it wasn't just the knights and the adventurers, but the villagers too—they were all working together to protect the place.

They all did what they could to protect their village, and the knights let them. They had come to the arrangement quite naturally, and not purely because the village had fallen into a state of emergency—it was clear that the relationship was one they were used to. She explained this to Gillis.

"In the past we worked at a village where the people and the knights worked together. Cooperation was a natural part of how the village functioned. I think the reason they came together so fluidly when the village was in danger was because working together was simply what they always did. They worked to cover for each other's shortcomings."

And perhaps before reaching that point, they had gone through problems much like the ones that Dima faced at present. But there was a precedent for communication and cooperation. Achieving the same thing would not be easy in a single day, but if they strove to work together, someday they would achieve their goals.

“Sir Gillis,” said Zack. “Perhaps you owe your townsfolk a touch more respect, no? Until the knights came along, they made things work on their own, through good and bad, you know? Now, they may not do things the way well-trained knights do, but they’re not so weak that they need constant protection either.”

Gillis was a little shaken—first Alec, then Shiori, and now Zack. It was like Gillis knew and understood what they were saying, but perhaps he simply lacked the courage to take a step in that direction. He would not have been so worried otherwise.

“Captain...” said Fanny, who had watched over in silence until now. There was a strong resolve in her eyes. “The decision to have me travel with this party was a sudden one, but they did their utmost to accept and accommodate me. That’s why I could work with them so easily. Let’s try to do the same with the people of Dima. I don’t mean they should handle everything, but if they are capable of doing some things on their own, we should accept that. In this place...it is *we* who are the outsiders.”

“Fanny...”

Fanny was one of Gillis’s own knights, and to have one of his own garrison tell him this seemed to move him. He accepted her gaze, and looked slowly at those around him—at Shiori, Alec, Zack, Linus, and Rurii, who wobbled as if to say, “*You’ll be fine!*”

Gillis then looked at the floor for a moment and closed his eyes. But it was just for an instant, after which he looked up at Fanny.

“It wasn’t *you* who needed to learn...” he said, the tension in his face relaxing into a smile. “It was *me*. We won’t be able to put everything into action immediately, but...let’s put some thought into what we can do.”

“That’s a fine start,” said Alec.

Gillis nodded at the adventurer. It was a slight gesture but not a vague one—it was resolute. Alec looked down at Shiori, who was smiling at him, and he replied with one of his own. Zack grinned, and Linus smiled like a young, innocent youth. Rurii, too, wobbled with joy.

In this way, the curtains fell on the insect disturbance that had so worried the people of Dima. The forest fell back into a familiar peace and quiet, and the townsfolk were able to return to their regular lives.

But the story of Dima itself did not end there.

Upon seeing off the adventurers who had rid the town of their insect problem, Captain Gillis Milveden of the Dima garrison knights went directly to the town’s mayor. Upon informing the man of the insect suppression, he also broached a few more topics—namely, that of cooperating in the task of collecting the magical beast materials

that the adventurers had left so the town could recoup some of its losses. He also asked for help from local law enforcement with regards to town security. Until then, Gillis had stubbornly refused the help of the locals, and so his sudden change of heart was at first viewed with suspicion. However, the successful collection of the magical beast materials marked a breaking of the ice, and a chance for the knights and the people of Dima to work together.

“Look at you! Such a thin young girl. Where are your muscles? Are you even eating properly?!”

It was the same kind of complaint Fanny was used to hearing from the old man when she was on patrol, but she now responded with a bright grin.

“Let’s not use the term ‘thin.’ Let’s say ‘in shape,’ okay?” she replied. “I assure you I’m eating my fill each and every day.”

“Hmph. The only thing you’ve got going for you is that sharp wit!”

The old man then held out a basket for them and turned to leave.

“Thanks so much for the eggs! We all love them!” Fanny said as he walked away.

“I only give them to you because they’re leftovers and I wouldn’t know what else to do with them!” said the old man.

“Leftovers, huh?”

Gillis peeked into the basket, which contained twelve eggs—exactly the number of garrison knights, including their chef. And still warm, to boot.

“Have to wonder why there’s always just enough leftovers for all of us, don’t you...?”

“And fresh too.”

The two knights looked at each other and laughed. The old man wasn’t the politest person in town, but in his own way he worried about and cared for the garrison knights.

Ever since the bug suppression incident, the knights and the people of the town had been learning to get along, and more townsfolk were on board with the idea. There were still many who saw the knights as outsiders, but this was not an issue that would be solved overnight. Yes, there were those who were biased, and those who were suspicious, but they were who they were, and that was fine. As the knights lowered their guard and opened their hearts to cooperation, more and more townsfolk started to accept them.

To be accepted, you first had to learn to accept—this was a lesson that both Fanny and Gillis had learned through experience.

Fanny took a look at the necklace that hung from her collar. It was a small bottle hanging from a leather strap, and it contained the scale dust that Shiori had given her. The dust sparkled as the sun

reflected off of it.

They had spent but a short time together, and yet the adventurers were truly good people at their core. Fanny had learned much.

Perhaps someday I, too, will become the sort of person capable of leading others.

Fanny hoped it would be so. And so she lived the days well, and she trained to bring that hope to life.

“Well, let’s be off,” said Gillis. “One more district to patrol.”

“Got it.”

Fanny stood up straight and began walking. She gripped the basket in her hands, and shared a passing greeting with a group of local law enforcement, who were on a patrol of their own.

The wind was chilly, and spring was still a long way away. Nonetheless, the problems with the townsfolk of Dima had begun to thaw, and the thought of it brought a smile to Fanny’s face.

10

Night had fallen. The streets were lit by magical lanterns, and the wafting scent of food drifted from houses around town. Shiori’s party had made it home, divided up their rewards, and were finally ready to call it a day.

“I’ll handle the request report,” said Zack. “I just want each of you to take a look at it in the next few days. Great work, team.”

“I’m out then!” said Linus, buoyed by his part of the bounty and ready to spend some of it on a night out on the town. “See y’all later!”

“Well, what now?” asked Alec, looking down at Shiori. “Perhaps a drink for the road?”

Shiori thought for a time, but in the end shook her head. She was bright and happy after a job well done, but she couldn’t quite hide the exhaustion in her face.

“I think I’ll just buy something to eat, then head home,” she said. “I’m a bit tired, and I want to write a letter to Annie too.”

Shiori wanted to finish her letter so she could send it in the morning when the first post was delivered for the day.

“Okay. Just take it easy and relax,” said Zack.

“I will. Will you two head out for a drink?” asked Shiori.

“Nope... Think I’ll head straight on home myself,” said Zack with a chuckle. “Bit exhausted, honestly.”

Shiori noticed that he was a little paler than usual.

“You don’t look so well, brother. Are you okay? It looks like you’ve broken out into a sweat...?”

Shiori ran over and touched Zack’s face.

“Uh...” uttered Alec, taken by surprise.

He knew that their relationship was that of brother and sister, but that didn't stop a touch of childish jealousy entering his tone of voice. Rurii looked up at him with great curiosity.

"You don't seem to have a fever..." said Shiori.

"No, it was just a bit hot in that carriage earlier," said Zack.

It was true that the carriage had been equipped with magical heating, but the ride home wasn't at all too warm. Alec knew that this was Zack putting up a front—the man didn't want Shiori knowing what was really bothering him.

"Blame it on old age and wearing too many layers," said Alec.

Alec made the joke deliberately to help Zack, but Zack wasn't particularly grateful.

"Shut it, you," he shot back.

Shiori giggled at the banter between the two men.

"No need to worry," said Zack, brushing Shiori's hand away before taking it in his own. "Yeah, I'm tired, but thanks to you, it's more than bearable. Without you, I'd be worse off. You reminded me that when it comes to winter expeditions, all of us rely on you. I got a chance to see with my own eyes how much your hard work has paid off. You did great, and I couldn't be more proud of you, little sister."

He was her brother and the guild master of the Tris Adventurers' Guild, and Shiori was at first surprised by his praise. Still, in the next instant, it made her so happy that tears welled in her eyes as she smiled.

"Thank you, brother," she said. "It makes me so happy to hear that."

Zack gave Shiori a pat on the head as her eyes glimmered with tears, still clasping her delicate hand as he did so. The grin he flashed at Alec for a brief moment made it clear that this was revenge for Alec's jab at Zack's age. Alec was left staring at Zack with displeasure and menace bleeding from his eyes as the man kept up his grin and finally released Shiori from his grasp.



All the same, the whole thing allowed Zack to keep hidden what he wanted to keep hidden, and so the three of them and their slime left the Guild.

They walked the city streets, chatting as they did so, and the moment struck Alec as truly precious. As a young boy, and later as a teen, he felt like he had lost everything, but here, now, he felt like he had things to treasure. There was his kindly younger brother, his generous older brother Zack, his friends, and the woman he loved—the woman he hoped would one day become a part of his family. Each of them had been so difficult to obtain, so rare, and yet for that very reason, so valuable.

He and Zack saw Shiori to her apartment, and she looked up and thanked them both.

“Once again, great work,” said Zack. “You just rest up and take it easy for the rest of the day. And don’t you let that Alec come round and bother you. Rest well, you hear?”

“Look at you playing the scary older brother,” muttered Alec.

Zack was very much nearing his absolute limit, and yet still he was oddly concerned about his sister, which is to say, he was intent on restraining his younger brother. Zack chuckled at what he thought was power over Alec, but Alec flashed a cheeky grin in return. Then he moved in closer to Shiori, lifted her delicate jaw with a finger, and kissed her.

Though Rurii merely trembled with delight, Alec was keenly aware of the cold air drifting from the man behind him. Still, he ignored it and went on kissing Shiori, slipping in a tongue to taste of her person.

“Oi,” said Zack, taking Alec by the shoulder. “Enough’s enough, isn’t it?”

He’d had enough, and while Shiori stood in place with her face bright red, Alec laughed.

“You and me are going home,” said Zack. “See you soon, Shiori.”

“Have a good night, brother. And you too, Alec. Make sure you both get some rest.”

“Sleep well, Shiori. See you soon,” said Alec.

Alec and Zack watched as Shiori’s kindly landlord came out to greet her and her slime. When the door into the wonderfully warm-looking apartment building closed, Alec let out a sigh and looked to the guild master. At that point, Zack crumpled in place, and though Alec quickly rushed to help him stay on his feet, Zack stomped hard into the ground and kept himself standing. Nonetheless, he was pale as a sheet, and the life had all but disappeared from his eyes.

“You all right?” Alec asked.

“Alec...” mumbled Zack, gripping Alec’s shoulder as if clinging for survival. “I can’t take it no more.”

There was a tremor running through Zack’s legs, his breathing was shallow, and a sweat had broken out on his forehead. Alec knew that this wasn’t just exhaustion, but all he could do was sigh and shake his head.

Nobody hated bugs like Zack did, but when it came to work, Zack killed those feelings—though the people who knew him best could always see the strain in his mannerisms and expression. This request was no different—Alec had seen traces of displeasure in Zack’s grim expression and his wandering eyes.

“You did good, Zack,” said Alec. “Your strength of will is a truly terrifying thing.”

This particular suppression request’s target—the carrion crawler—was actually the reason for Zack’s trauma. He’d always hated bugs, ever since he was a boy, but it wasn’t until his rookie years that his disgust turned into full-blown trauma. The rumor was that Zack had been tripped and paralyzed, at which point he’d almost been swallowed whole by the magical beast. He’d never been the same around bugs since, but his sheer mental fortitude allowed him to go to work without letting it show.

Nonetheless, that fortitude had its limits. Whenever Zack did a job involving bugs, he’d collapse into bed and sleep for an entire day. And it was even worse this time than in the past—he’d been on expedition with his own little sister, the woman he once loved, and was intent on not showing even a hint of weakness. He’d pushed himself harder than usual.

“Shall I call a carriage?” asked Alec.

“Please...” uttered Zack.

Zack was going to be stuck in bed for at least the next day, and Alec grimaced at the idea that he’d be with the man for most of it. Still, he took them to the corner of the street where he could flag down a passing carriage.

11

A few days later, the Lovner family margravine, Annelie Lovner, was in a room at her manor, working conscientiously on an image in her sketchbook. Her secretary and fiancé, Dennis, watched over her as she worked. Her colored pencils worked in a light and rhythmical fashion, slowly bringing to life the image in her mind. She was working on a rough sketch of Saint Sanna Grunden, a figure revered by the Tris Cathedral for her motherly affection and healing.

The request had come from the new archbishop of the cathedral.

He wanted a portable altarpiece with a youthful feel.

“Of course, the current works, done by famed and historical artists are splendid,” he’d said, “but I think it would be nice to have something that our youth can feel at ease with too.”

The archbishop was quite youthful for his position too—he was only in his forties—and he smiled easily as he explained what he wanted. The name that had first come up for the altarpiece was that of a renowned old painter, but the archbishop knew that if he wanted the youth of the church to accept it, then it was best to have someone young do the work. It was then that Annelie’s name had come up.

“You are a highly regarded and promising young artist, known for your active use of new styles and your reverence for tradition. I am sure you will create something perfect for use at our cathedral.”

And so, he had requested an altarpiece that was youthful in feel, and yet still in keeping with the historical Tris Cathedral. The request had come suddenly, but nonetheless Annelie was quick to agree to it. It was her first big job as an artist.

I can't help but feel like my luck has increased since finally achieving a love I waited fifteen years for.

The thought brought a giggle to the margravine, and she went on sketching her image of the saint, Sanna Grunden. There was not much in the way of detailed information on the appearance of Saint Sanna—all that remained was a diary entry from a nun who had been close to her, which described her as a kind woman with lustrous blonde hair and a true strength at the core of her being.

It was for this reason that portraits of the saint were largely left to the imagination of the artist who drew her. The portraits that remained reflected societal views on women and popular culture, and were useful windows into the world at that time. The portraits that were to be drawn now and in the future, too, would surely go on to make meaningful historical artifacts for historians.

Annelie’s hand moved without pause, and she went on drawing the saint that existed in her own heart. She had skin of a soft white like butter melted in milk; glossy, long flowing silken hair; and eyes that sparkled like water. The saint’s slight smile expressed the strength that existed within her, and yet, at the same time, there was also something of a fleeting fragility to her.

“Did you just draw...Shiori?” Dennis asked.

“I did. When I think of the saint of Tris Cathedral, I can’t help but think of Shiori.”

Kindness and inner strength. The words had immediately brought to mind an image of Shiori.

“Well, they do call her the saint of healing and motherly affection. In that sense, she’s the perfect fit.”

Shiori had many secret admirers. She had that gentle smile, and she never hesitated to reach out and help those in need. She healed those she met with an encompassing kindness, and yet there was something of a sense of mystery to her, also.

In many ways, Shiori mirrored Sanna Grunden, who herself was a pilgrim of unknown origin.

“I just think she’s the most appropriate model for the saint,” said Annelie. “I know I can’t just draw a picture of Shiori, but...I suppose it would be best to ask her permission.”

In the picture she had drawn in colored pencil, Annelie saw both Saint Sanna Grunden and her new friend, Shiori—it brought a smile to her face.

That was about the time that Walt entered the room.

“Lord Annelie,” he said. “I have a package for you from Miss Shiori.”

“Oh? From Shiori?”

They had only been friends for a short time, but already they had sent letters back and forth a few times. This was the first time either had sent a package of some sort.

“I wonder what it is?”

Mail addressed to the margravine and lord of the family sometimes contained suspicious objects. There were also those who used the names of those connected with the Lovners to send mail, and for that reason mail was always opened and screened in advance of it reaching the margravine. Annelie thus knew that what she was receiving was safe.

She looked into the already opened package to find a small box, within which was a bottle. The white powder inside of it glimmered like smooth, dim moonlight as it swayed within the bottle.

“My...how beautiful,” murmured Annelie. “It’s like someone collected shavings of moonlight.”

The letter that came with the package first asked after Annelie’s health, and then described recent happenings and how Shiori had come in contact with the dust she had sent. It was scale dust, collected from a phantasm butterfly, and a variant at that. The dust from variants had a far more beautiful gloss than the ordinary butterflies, and it wasn’t something often seen around the marketplace. It was often mixed with pigment colors to give them a beautiful sheen.

“Mixing this kind of thing in with paints is prohibited for exhibitions, but...”

Being that Annelie did not intend to make this piece public, it did not matter.

“Call the art supplier,” she said. “I’d like to have them make something for me immediately.”

The scale dust had lit the fires of creativity within Annelie, and she grinned at the bottle in her hand.

A few days later, Shiori received a letter from Annelie thanking her for the gift and, a few weeks after that, she received a package delivered via registered post. It was very carefully wrapped, and within it was a painting in a delicate, elegant frame.

“Would you look at this...?” muttered Alec admiringly as he helped Shiori carry it to her apartment. Rurii looked upon the painting also, and trembled with delight.

The painting within the frame was that of a dark-haired female standing in a moonlit forest. Her skin was a pale white, smooth as pearls, and her silken hair had a wondrous gloss to it. The woman wore a most mysterious smile. The gentle sheen to the painting came from a brightening agent—it was the scale dust that Shiori had sent to the margravine.

The accompanying letter, written in a most graceful script, read, *“This is the most I am capable of at the present moment, but I dearly hope to someday paint a true portrait of you.”*

“Is this...me...?” uttered Shiori.

“Yep. No way it could be anyone else,” said Alec, letting out a sigh of admiration. “Amazing. You’re like a lunar goddess.”

“Oh, my... What should I do? She’s made me far too beautiful...”

Shiori was flustered.

“I wouldn’t say that at all,” Alec chuckled as he wrapped her in his arms. “Annelie really is something else. She’s really captured you here.”

She was brimming with a motherly kindness in the image, and there was a slight mystery to her smile. It brought to mind the healing saint revered by the Tris Cathedral.

“Erm...Alec. Say anything more than that and I’ll start blushing.”

Her ears had already turned pink at his lavish praise, and she buried her head in her chest. Alec lifted her jaw so she was looking up at him, then dropped a kiss on her lips.

“But to me, you *are* a goddess,” he said. “You’re *my* goddess. You are healing, generous...and you are my saint.”

This was no mere flowery expression—it was Alec’s honest feelings. Shiori was bright red and speechless, and Alec kissed her again—a lingering kiss that expressed the depth of his feelings and love for her. Tasting of her lips in this way filled his heart.

The tension left Shiori’s delicate frame, and Alec held her tight in his arms, kissing her ever more deeply. As they kissed more, he let out a sigh of pleasure.

I love you...

The word was a part of his breath, and it sent a shiver through Shiori's body.

Some day, when everything is accounted for...

He pictured her dressed in pure white, the woman he loved, smiling at him, and he continued to indulge in her lips.

Afterword

Hello new readers, and welcome back continuing fans. This is You Fuguruma. Thank you so very much for picking up volume four of *Housekeeping Mage from Another World*. The days never seem to get any less busy, but I'm happy I could bring you all this fourth volume.

This volume continues the story that began in volume three, and concludes the Silveria arc. It's a fateful encounter with Annelie and Dennis. Though their positions are different, they overcome a variety of problems stemming from Dennis's fourth-generation immigrant status, and choose to spend their lives together. This in turn causes Alec and Shiori to think more seriously about their own future.

Though Shiori and Alec have surmised something of one another's pasts in their conversations, they nonetheless decide they want to stay together, even given their complicated circumstances. Their revelations have been put off for the time being, but as for how they will face the secrets that each of them holds...that's something I hope to write more about in future volumes.

I think anyone who has read the series up until this volume already knows this, but I love writing about big magical beasts, and I really put a lot into the scene where the mythical beast, the Yeti, makes its appearance. *Housekeeping Mage* might indeed be considered a romance novel for female readers, but I had a blast writing that.

I'd like to give a big thanks to Nama-sensei for the image of the scene! It was the perfect embodiment of handsome magical beast versus handsome adventurers! I'm so grateful for the way you always bring the scenes to life just as I imagine them, from Shiori all dressed up, her intimate moments with Alec, his "proposal," and of course the dejected Alec looking on as Zack and Shiori share a little moment together.

As always, a big thanks to my editor for the wonderful feedback and support, and to Akihito-sensei for bringing Shiori and Alec's adventure to life in manga format, and to all the people in the publishing industry giving it their best in the midst of the present global issues we currently face.

I can't forget to say a special thank-you to all the readers who have been supporting my regular publication over at Shosetsuka ni Naro. It is thanks to all of you that I managed to publish this fourth

volume. I'll keep on doing my best, so I hope you'll keep supporting my work.

Until we meet again.



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Housekeeping Mage from Another World: Making Your
Adventures Feel Like Home! Volume 4
by You Fuguruma

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Illustrations by Nama

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Ebook edition 1.0: January 2023